

“Face” as a leitmotif in the structure of power in Chinese society

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Thank you! Good {morning, afternoon, evening}. I am delighted to be invited to this distinguished university to say a little about the structure of power in Chinese society. Because this topic would be too broad, today I would like just to discuss the connections between the structure of power and the face-work.

I should begin by mentioning that a great deal has already been written in the past about the structure of traditional Chinese society, which has variously been assessed as autocratic, totalitarian, hierarchical, patriarchal, monarchical, et cetera. The basic thrust of these assessments is that Chinese society is organized around a single powerful autocrat, and that everyone else is forced to obey the orders issued by this autocrat.

In fact, this assessment is more or less accurate! But because it does not consider the mediating role of “face,” the result is a rather wooden and stereotypical caricature, as if there were no way to counterbalance the asymmetries of power and status. At the same time, it is well-known that “face” is a salient feature of Chinese culture. If we begin our examination of power in Chinese society from this concept of “face,” we might be able to see matters in a new light.

There are two words that are translated into English as “face”: *lian* and *mianzi*. Today we will be discussing the one that Chinese calls “*mian zi*.” *Mianzi* (face) in China can basically be seen as a form of external display. But more importantly, the tendency among Chinese people is to consider this image, whether good or bad, as something that must be upheld for others; in other words, one must also “give face.” In China, not giving face is a rather serious faux pas. This feature of social interaction has resulted in a reluctance to offer criticism or to directly point out the other person’s failures, in many contexts, including in official and political dealings.

Confucianism itself is ambiguous on this point. For example, Confucianism on the one hand emphasizes the importance of virtue, while on the other hand it emphasizes the importance of obedience to authority. But if the one in power is not virtuous, should one obey the folly of the powerful, or criticize him? By examining the realities of Confucian practice and Chinese life, it becomes evident that obedience takes precedence over virtue. On the surface of it, this is just a manifestation of autocratic rule. But, the actual situation is more complex. There is a principle

here that both parties in a two-way interaction abide by. The important problem is not that one may do wrong to another, but rather that protecting the prestige and status of an authority is also a form of protecting one's own face; if one does not "give face" to the authority, then there is the risk of losing face oneself. [For the one in lower position, is there any possibility of winning, or only losing?] [Better give a foretaste here of the main point you are going to make in the remainder of the paper.]

To illustrate what I have just said, I will provide two examples below. The first is a celebrated legal case from the late Qing dynasty. The protagonist in this case was named Yang Naiwu. Mr. Yang was a Juren, a successful candidate in the imperial examinations at the provincial level in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Because his house was relatively large, he rented one of his rooms to a newlywed couple. The new bride was nicknamed Little Cabbage. Little Cabbage's husband was a maker of bean-curd. He made it himself and sold it himself, and so he was often away from home. Little Cabbage was illiterate, so Mr. Yang would sometimes give her reading lessons in her rented room, and would sometimes invite her to his home for a meal. Unexpectedly, Little Cabbage's husband suddenly died. The local county officials, on the basis of local rumor, maintained that Mr. Yang fancied Little Cabbage, and was responsible for the death of her husband. Thus they brought Mr. Yang to trial in the local court. Mr. Yang of course did not confess to the crime. Upon application of torture, he did make a confession, but once he was in prison, he cried out that justice had not been done and appealed his case. He went to trial, he denied it again, was tortured and made a confession, and went to jail, then appealed again. The same process was repeated a total of six times. Eventually the imperial court sent a representative to investigate the matter. This representative was bribed by the local county officials and keep the original conviction intact, and the imperial court sent another. This latter process was also repeated a total of three times. Finally, this case aroused the ire of officials in Beijing from the same county as Mr. Yang, who persuaded the emperor to bring all parties involved in the case to Beijing for a re-trial. It turned out that Mr. Yang was not responsible for the death of Little Cabbage's husband, the conviction was overturned, and his name was cleared of the crime. But, since the conclusion of this case caused the imperial court to lose face, Mr. Yang was stripped of his position as a Juren, and, on the spot, both he and Little Cabbage were beaten with more than 20 strokes of the rod. Furthermore, the imperial court did not acknowledge that the countrymen of Mr. Yang had anything to do with

the reversal of the outcome, since they too were imperial officials and it was considered disgraceful for imperial court that its officials criticized its handling of a case.

Another example is much more recent, arising just a couple of years ago. There was a village party secretary named Li Changping. Mr. Li was antipathetic to the local governments falsely boasting about achievements that they had actually not accomplished. So he wrote a letter to the Premier Zhu Rongji, with a subject line "Speaking Truth to the Premier." As it turned out, the central government sent an inspector to the village to see whether the accomplishments were real, and, as usual, the local officials had made many feints and then claimed Mr. Li was a liar. After the inspector left the village, the village government accused Mr. Li of making them lose face, and asked him to resign. After he resigned, he became a newsmaker in Beijing, and in his articles he naturally brought up bad deeds of the local leaders. After the leaders in his home village learned of his articles, they confiscated all available copies of those issues of the newspaper in their village, and forbade him ever to return to the village.

From the above examples we can see three principles at work in the relationship between face and power; I describe these below.

First: the Chinese practice of giving face often occurs in the context of a hierarchical structure of interaction. As a result, people of low status often must give face to people of high status, but high status people do not necessarily have to give face to people of low status. Since the authority that comes from having been given face usually cannot be seen as equivalent to the legal-rational or charisma authority, the resulting face is more like an externally applied image of prestige. Thus in China, it is said that giving someone face is like pasting a gold sticker on their face; the point is that the person's face is obviously not actually made of gold, it is just a mask. So Chinese people speak of this kind of face, *mianzi*, as painting over the surface, as placing flowerpots over the bare ground, as all image and no substance. As Mr. Yan Yunxiang said, the flow of gifts is from inferiors to superiors, from lower to higher. The giving of face shares this characteristic; those below must give face to those above. Furthermore, this intangible giving of face is far more valuable than the tangible giving of gifts.

Secondly: In order to achieve the giving of face, Chinese people, in interacting, normally must establish a **central** authority figure (or group), in order that face-giving can be directed toward this central figure. The key moment in an interaction, at which time power becomes evident, is the

moment at which central position is settled. At this point, the truth and propriety of the speech and conduct of those facing the authority become immaterial; what matters is that they uphold the position and the honor of the authority. An example of this is the importance placed upon seating arrangements at Chinese banquets; being given the central seat indicates to whom the greatest face belongs, and at the dinner table the others must take care to give that person face. Significantly, the Chinese word for China means literally **Central** Nation; and by tradition China considered itself the center, the heartbeat of the wider world, to whom neighboring nations must bring tribute.

Thirdly: Face-related behavior always takes place within particular contexts that cause the status gradations that I spoke of above (in the first principle) to be rather ill-defined. That is, positions within incommensurate status systems must be set into relation with one another. For example, when an official of the central government enters a local situation, his status still depends on various local factors. This explains why many legal cases in China must be tried in a neutral locality distant from the original setting; this is an illustration of how the instantiation of “centrality” must take into account local “guanxi” relationship networks and definitions of power specific to the particular situation, and not simply flatly defined on the basis of any given status scale. Some research about the orientation of face by Stephan Feucht wang makes a similar point. Consider the above two stories: in both cases, an official of the central government (high in the status hierarchy) came down to examine a local situation, but given the particularities of the guanxi (relationship) networks in operation there, the central government official was not ascribed a central position of power. There is a Chinese saying, “a mighty dragon cannot overpower a snake in its old haunts”. This state of affairs is invisible with an overly simplistic rendering of power structures that neglects face.

Overall, we see that the determination of where the center is, of who is in authority, of what is correct and proper, of which way face-giving flows, all together constitute a form of order in society. We have good reason to believe that this kind of order has helped China maintain method and harmony in society. Conversely, challenging the authority or breaking the settled center, bringing up criticism of the center, would be tantamount to shattering order and harmony between people.

But, at this point we may ask: can the grip of the center in fact be broken? I believe that since the opening of China in the 1980's, there have already been some new trends, one of the most important being the adoption of non-democratic, tactics for social maneuvering. I will mention

three here that relate to the giving of face.

1. One new tactic is to mobilize social capital – to find a mediator. Going through guanxi networks, one may find a person who those in authority would give face, and in this way resolve knotty standoffs. Arthur Smith, in his 1894 book “*The Chinese Characteristics*,” mentions the existence of mediators in China, who ask both parties in a conflict to step back in their claims to face, and thus become reconciled. Since guanxi networks among Chinese are densely complex, it is not impossible in this way to find such a mediator.

2. A second new tactic is to work through the mass media – to **effect** public loss of official’s face. The mass media can shape public opinion and bring pressure upon bureaucrats, such that bureaucrats who wish to save face must “change their ways” -- or at least their techniques. If Mr. Yang, falsely accused of murder, had not had the benefit of the reporting of the *Shenbao* newspaper, his case would not have attracted the attention of the imperial court. The second story, of Mr. Li, the Party Secretary turned investigative reporter, also illustrates the value attached to be in the news— yet even here the operation of guanxi and contending of power are often involved

3. A third tactic is to collectively visit a higher authority to voice one’s grievance and ask for help, or to raise a disturbance. Such collective action from below is based on the belief that laws fail where the violators are legion, and is to “rip out a layer of the bureaucracy as a whole, without opposing the face of any given individual though occasionally it is so.” Considering the number of people involved, and the extent and momentum of the action, this approach is like a game of strategy played against the bureaucratic class; to some extent, the personal interests of particular bureaucrats remain untouched, and matters are resolved without investigations that would expose the responsibilities of particular individuals. This approach has recently become more and more commonly adopted by the people of China, including retired Communist Party cadres, rural teachers, laid-off manual laborers, farmers, et cetera.

We have seen, through the above discussion, that what seemed like a rigid social structure is maintained by a complex and flexible system of face-work. Thus, in China, power is not just the manifestation of a rigidly demarcated hierarchical system standing alone; it is also dependent on the concept of face, which can be used both to maintain the status quo, and, sometimes, to subvert it.