**face/面子(Miàn Zi)**

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| Chinese Perspective | WENG Naiqun | 27 May 2022 |

The Chinese phrase of “面子（*mianzi*）”consists of two characters: “面（*mian*）”and “子（*zi*）”. “面（*mian*）”is a variant of the ancient Chinese hieroglyph, which mainly refers to the front part of the head, that is “脸（*lian*）（*face*）”，another Chinese word refers to the front part of the head. “面（*mian*）”also has many derivative meanings, such as“见面（*jianmian*）（meet）”, “表面（*biaomian*）（the surface of an object）”, “方向（*fangxiang*）（direction）”and so on. “子（*zi*）” in ancient times referred to descendants, and later refers specifically to sons. It can also refer to the seeds of the plant or eggs of animals, etc. In the phrase of “面子（*mianzi*）”, “子（*zi*）”is a fictitious word with no real meaning.

“面子（*mianzi*）（*face*）”is a very important concept of interpersonal relationships in Chinese society and culture. The meaning of “面子（*mianzi*）（*face*）”does not refer to the specific part or organ of the body itself, nor to the specific face itself, but to the metaphysical socio-cultural meaning it is given, which in Chinese refers to “尊严（*zunyan*）（dignity）”and “声望（*shengwang*）（prestige）”. These two socio-cultural concepts can be turned into individual power and influence in practice.

Anthropologist Hsien Chin Hu’s article entitled "The Chinese Chinese Concepts of 'Face'" published in American Anthropologist（N.S, 46 1944）states that according to anthropologists and psychologists, "the desire for 'prestige' is pervasive in all human societies." In other words, in his view Chinese concept of "face" is just an example of a universal phenomenon.

The first chapter of the book Chinese Characteristics, published in 1894 by the British missionary A.H. Smith (1845-1932), who had lived in China for twenty-two years, described the particularly important concepts of "face" in the Chinese characteristics and the corresponding behavior with dramatic performance. Although the famous modern Chinese writer Lu Xun believed that there were "errors" in Smith's above writings, he still gave the book a high evaluation. Two weeks before his death, he reiterated his hope in a short essay, that the book would be translated into Chinese and published, so that the Chinese people could be used as a mirror for self-examination.

In The Gifts, when analyzing elements in the ethnography of Franz Boas about the Kwakiutl and Haida Indian noblemen of the Northwest Americas, Mauss points out that they have the same concept of "face" as in Chinese mandarin or officer. In a *potlatch* of their noblemen, they have to show off their wealth. Among their popular stories, there was a great mysterious chiefs who had never held a *potlatch* that he had a "rotten face". Mauss argues that "The expression is more apt than it is even in China; for to lose one’s face is to lose one’s spirit, which is truly the“face”, the dancing mask, the right to incarnate a spirit and wear an emblem or totem. It is the veritable *persona* which is at stake, it can be lost in the potlatch just as it can be lost in the game of gift-giving, in war, or through some error in ritual.”（M. Mauss, *The Gift*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York . London. p. 37-38）.

In his famous book entitled " My Country, My People（吾国吾民）" (1935), Lin Yutang（林语堂）argued that “the three immutable laws of the Chinese empirical thought system, whose perpetual invariance is beyond Roman Catholic dogma, and whose authority exceeds the federal constitution of the United States of America... Their names are: 面情（*mian-qing*）, 命运（*ming-yun*）and 恩典（*en-dian*）” (Lin Yutang, "My Country and My People", Jiangsu People's Publishing House, November 2014, p.172.). Later on, several scholars believed that Lin refers to“面情（*mianqing*）, 命运（*mingyun*）and 恩典（*endian*）”, that is "面子（*mianzi*），命运（*mingyun*）and人情（*renqing*）". They translated these three terms into English as "Face, Fate, Favor".（陈之昭：“面子心理的理论分析与实际研究”，载于杨国枢主编《中国人的心理》p.122）.

In his article entitled “On Face-Work”, Erving Goffman has been pointed out: “In our Anglo-American society, as in some others, the phrase “to lose face” seems to mean in wrong face, to be out of face, or to be shamefaced. The phrase “to save one’s face” appears to refer to the process by which the person sustains an impression for others that he has not lost face. Following Chinese usage, one can say that “to give face” is to arrange for another to take a better line than he might otherwise have been able to take, the other thereby gets face given him, this being one way in which he can gain face.

As an aspect of the social code of any social circle, one may expect to find an understanding as to how far a person should go to save his face. Once he takes on a self-image expressed through face he will be expect to live up to it. In different ways in different societies he will be required to show self-respect, abjuring certain actions because they are above or beneath him, while forcing himself to perform others even though they cost him dearly. (Goffman, E. 1955. “On Face-Work”. Psychiatry 1955(18):213-231).

A society that concerns about *renqing* is bound to be a society that emphasizes "face". It is easy for an individual to grow up in such a society to learn: the more power a person holds, the more complex his social network; When he deals with others, the more likely for the other party feels hard to refuse his requests; When he does some things on his own, he more likely won’t be fails. Therefore, in social life, he must not only try his best to expand his actual power, but also strive to make all kinds of "face-work" to show off his identity, status, wealth, knowledge, as well as his interpersonal relationships, so that others dare not easily refuse his own requests.

Valuing face is not a mindset unique to the powerful. In Chinese society, face is not only about the privilege that an individual may enjoy, but also about the possibility that he will be accepted by others. Therefore, most people believe in valuing face, and "taking care of their own and others' faces" has also become a conscious and unconscious creed and behavior in personal life. Aperson who "pays attention to face" will not only use the above and other "face-work" to "fight for face" for himself, but also try to take care of the face of others; If he cannot take positive action to "adding face" to others, at least he must "perfunctory face" with the other party on the surface. If others intercede with him, he does not "give face", and strictly refuses, the other party may feel very "faceless", or even hold a grudge, as soon as there is an opportunity, they will deliberately let him "bad face", and finally make "everyone faceless". On the other hand, if he accepts the other party's request and "do a favor" to other party, he will feel that his status is affirmed, and "gain brilliance on the face", and he must return the favor in the future, so that "everyone has face". In some social setting, Chinese even use many symbolic actions to gain each other's “face”（黄光国：“中国人的人情关系”，《中国人：观念与行为》p.41-42）. In this sense, “face” is also just like as “*renqing*” has to be reciprocity.

Fairbank pointed out in the fourth edition of his book *America and China*: “The Chinese type of humanism included a concern for the dignity of the individual, but from a social point of view. “Face” has been a social matter. Personal dignity has been derived from right conduct and social approval it has secured. “Loss of face” came from failure to observe the rules of conduct so that others saw one at a disadvantage. Personal worth was not considered innate within each human soul, as in the West, but had to be acquired. Chinese humanism recognized that some persons had more gifts than others-human being, though by nature good, were not equal in their capacities; there was no theory that each had an immortal soul.

On the contrary, right conduct was attuned to a hierarchic society in which some people dominated others because of their status. The center of Confucian moral life, *ren*(仁) or “benevolent love（仁爱），” was a distinctly un-Christian though logical doctrine which called for loving others in a graded fashion, beginning with one’s own father, family, and friends.” (Fairbank, J.K.（1983）The United States and China: Fourth edition, revised and enlarged. Harvard University Press. p.135.)

Numerous studies have shown that the concept of "face" is not unique to China, but in a sense universal. Obviously, the notion of "face" has some connection to "A category of human mind" explored by Mauss and his colleagues, that the concept of "person/personne" and "self/moi" that are mainly associated with "law" and "morality". Mauss particularly emphasized that their above research was mainly based on ethnographic socio-historical research methods. It is through many ethnographic sources of different eras, different regions, and different social cultures that reveal how people shape the concepts of "person" and "self" based on different systems of laws, religions, customs, social structures, mentalities, ethical and moral. In the Chinese, where Han Chinese are the majority, as an important concept related to interpersonal relations and maintaining the ethical and moral order of traditional society, the root of "face" is Confucian ethics and morality. But it is constantly evolving with the development and change of social culture. Due to the socio-cultural differences of different races, ethnic groups and regions, as well as the differences in age, gender, economic production and industry categories under the same social culture, as well as the hierarchical differences in social structure relations, the connotation and practice of "face" in China are also complex and diverse. Therefore, when exploring and discussing the concept of "face", the investigation of its time and space, that is, history and locality, is an important way to understand its essence. The concept of "face" in Chinese social culture is a kind of presentation of the concept of social "role", "person" and "self" embedded in people's social life in the context of Chinese social culture.