

## ***Chinese Face over Centenaries***

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Transcript of the talk given at the Open University, 08 April 2022

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Hello Cybermates! I'm privileged to be given this opportunity to talk about Chinese face over centenaries. I am Gu Yueguo representing the Artificial Intelligence and Human Language Research Lab, Beijing Foreign Studies University, and also The Academy of Social Sciences. Here are the headings for my talk:

1. Face: A Universal Phenomenon
2. Face terms and expressions
3. What is face? Exclusive property of the Chinese?
4. Method of investigation: Conceptual analysis
5. Chinese face in the semiotic layer
6. The behavioural layer: Some case studies
7. The social fact layer: Has Chinese *lian-mian* changed its face in parallel with the changing China?
8. Chinese-ness of Chinese face: Some ever-lasting beliefs and values

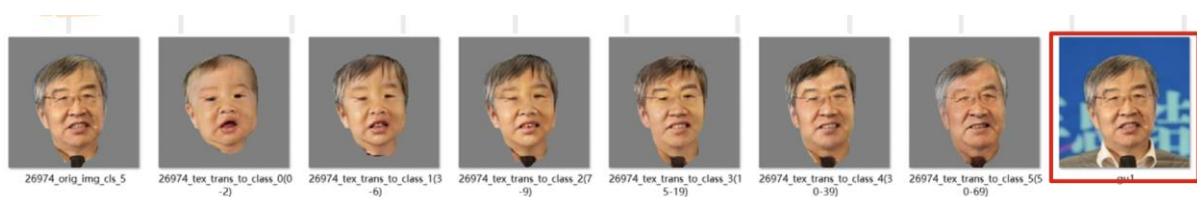
### **1. Face: A Universal Phenomenon**

#### **The biological/physiological face**

On the torso of every homo sapiens there sits an organ with a front called in Chinese “*liǎn*” 脸 “face” in English, “*faccia*” in Italian, etc. In the present-day AI-booming era, automatic face recognition, automatic face verification, face check-in and check-out, and automatic face detection and tracking - you name it - have become the order of the day. Furthermore, deep-learning algorithms enable photo age progression and regression. To quote Or-El et al., 2020:2, you simply give a well-learned AI algorithm just one photo and it will give you a chain of photos marking the photo-bearer's lifespan development.

#### **Face development over lifespan AI-reconstructed**

Here is the result of an AI algorithm we developed to do lifespan age progression and regression. You know who the photo-bearer is (Prof. Gu Yueguo), and you are in the best position to give us a grade.



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The face we have talked about so far is biological/ physiological, and it is universal in three fundamental aspects:

- A. Universal possession: everyone has it;
- B. Universal structure: a pair of eyes, a nose, a mouth and a pair of ears on both sides; and
- C. Universal growth and slow change over a lifespan.

Bearing the three universals in mind, we come to another face, to be called, for the ease of reference, “social face”. Is it universal too? You can testify it by looking at my face shown on my PPT. You can also testify it by looking at yourself in the mirror. Have you visually seen the social face? I am a hundred percent sure you can’t visually see it.

## 2. Face Terms and Expressions

### Two lexical items: *mian* and *lian*

Random House Webster’s *Unabridged Dictionary of English* tracks the first instance of the English word face in between 1250-1300 in the period of ME. The earliest Chinese character for face is 面 (*miàn*), which is found in oracle bone inscriptions, a mature Chinese writing system prevalent in the late Shang Dynasty (1700-1100 BC remember!). There is another character in Chinese also referring to face, namely 脸 --- *lian* --- which appeared during the Wei and Jin Dynasties (220- 580).

### The character *mian* 面: its evolution over millennia

 花113(甲) 商	 甲415(甲) 商	 包2.271 戰國.楚	 天策 戰國.楚	 說文.面部
 睡.法204(隸) 秦	 老子乙前31上(隸) 西漢	 相馬經15下(隸) 西漢	 武威簡.有司7(隸) 西漢	 熹.易.說卦(隸) 東漢
 西狹頌(隸) 東漢				

面 (*miàn*), as shown in the Figure, is first a pictogram in oracle bone inscriptions highlighting the eye as the distinctive feature of face, and has lost its picturesqueness in the East Han (25-220). *Lian*, on the other hand, has two written variations: the traditional 臉 and the simplified 脸. *Lian* was initially used to refer to the upper part of the face, and later enlarged to cover the whole face. So, since the Wei and Jin Dynasties, the Chinese society/culture, contemporary with the Dark Middle Ages in the Western World, adopted two lexical items *mian* and *lian* referring to the biological/physiological face of the Chinese population living in Central China.

Over several thousand years, *mian* and *lian* have been used to construct many expressions, idioms, sayings and moral maxims. 要面子 (*yao mianzi*) keep face, 丢脸 (*diu lian*), lose face, are among the most common ones. Obviously, to say “someone has lost face”, or

“someone has been given face”, the face lost or given cannot be biological unless it is in the extraordinary context of medical surgery. The face here refers to someone’s invisible social face.

I face a very tough difficulty here in my presentation due to the lexical differences between Chinese and English. The Chinese mianzi and lian both are rendered in one

English word “face”. This is very unfortunate because mian and lian are loaded with separate cultural values which get lost in translation. In order to spell out the Chinese indigenous values, I will use the Chinese original mianzi and lian in my presentation of the Chinese “social face”. I hereby beg everybody’s pardon and put up with me for 20 minutes if any inconvenience to comprehension incurs.

I also want to remind you that organisations also have face, not just individuals.

### **3. What is social face? Is it an exclusive property of Chinese people?**

Very interestingly, as early as the late nineteenth century, Arthur Smith, a twenty-two year missionary of the American Board in China, wrote a book entitled *Chinese Characteristics* (1894), the first chapter of which was on “Face”:

*At first sight nothing can be more irrational than to call that which is shared with the whole human race a "characteristic" of the Chinese. But the word "face" does not in China signify simply the front part of the head, but is literally a compound noun of multitude, with more meanings than we shall be able to describe, or perhaps to comprehend. (Smith, 1894. Chinese Characteristics, p.16)*

Smith’s view is echoed by his contemporary, also a missionary, John Macgowan who also wrote a book about China entitled *Men and Manners of Modern China*, which also includes a chapter (23) on face:

*“Face ” is one of the most potent, and at the same time one of the most amusing words in the Chinese language. ... It represents rather an idea that permeates the whole of society. It may be said to be the one dramatic element that makes every Chinese a play-actor, and his own life the stage on which he acts the farces and comedies that are constantly being played in everyday life. (Macgowan, 1912. Men and Manners of Modern China, p. 301)*

Bertrand Russell, one of the prominent philosophers of the 20th century, was also impressed by Chinese face:

*The business of “saving face,” which often strikes foreigners in China as ludicrous, is only the carrying- out of respect for personal dignity in the sphere of social manners. Everybody has “face,” even the humblest beggar; there are humiliations that you must not inflict upon him, if you are not to outrage the Chinese ethical code. If you speak to a Chinaman in a way that transgresses the code, he will laugh, because your words must be taken as spoken in jest if they are not to constitute an offence. (Russell, 2021 [1922] *The Problem of China*, p. 158)*

Lin Yutang was among the first few Chinese intellectuals who looked at Chinese face reflectively and critically in his book *My Country and My People* (2000 [1935]). Although 73 years have gone by since the first publication of the work, I cannot help quoting him in full. He says:

*With the Doctrine of Social Status and the conception of stratified equality, certain laws of Chinese social behavior arise as a result. They are the three immutable laws*

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*of the Chinese universe, more eternal than a Roman Catholic dogma, and more authoritative than the Constitution of the United States. They are in fact the three Muses ruling over China. Their names are Face, Fate and Favour. [So, remember, 'face' comes first!] These three sisters have always ruled China, and are ruling China still.*

### Westernization of Chinese face

Goffman was influenced not by Lin, but by Hu (1944). Goffman's notion of face was not used in its Chinese original, but through the reinterpretation of it by the author (e.g. emerging *lian* and *mianzi* into one).

Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) reinterpret Goffman's by differentiating two faces:

A: Negative face (foreign to the Chinese mind)

B: Positive face (similar to Chinese *lian*)

Some Chinese scholars adopt Brown and Levinson's and reapply to Chinese context. To me, it is, using a Chinese proverb, like cutting Chinese feet to fit a pair of foreign shoes.

### Recap

The four authors all wrote during the most turbulent period in the whole Chinese history, when it witnessed the demolition of the 2000-year old imperial system, national humiliations from foreign invasions and occupations, and movements against

Confucian orthodoxy. If we take the inception of the written character 面 about 4000 years ago as an indicator of fostering social face, we naturally pose such questions to ourselves:

A. Has the notion of Chinese face undergone changes concurrent with the alterations of dynasties over 4000 years?

B. Has the face concern articulated by the four authors at China's most turbulent period changed its "face" under the social-political-cultural pressure?

It is impossible to explore in depth the two questions within a 20-minute talk. What we can realistically do is to discuss some interesting cases and indicate the method in which they can be effectively investigated in the future.

### 4. Method of investigation: conceptual analysis

The social face is invisible to the visual eye. In order to see it we have to employ our mind's eye in order to examine it "face to face". The conceptual analysis proposed below enables us to make the Chinese social face visible to the reader's mind's eye. Conceptual analysis is the method extensively employed in analytic philosophy (e.g., Grice, 1987; Austin, 1962) and as well as in the philosophy of science (e.g., Bunge 1998 [1967]).

To quote Bunge:

*The concept is the unit of thought; accordingly, the theory of concepts should be the philosophical equivalent of the atomic theory. Concepts, like material atoms, are not given in experience but must be sought by analysis.* (1998 [1967]: 51)

Analysis of what? Clearly, of the linguistic expressions of knowledge, since conceptual knowledge comes wrapped in signs: words, symbols, diagrams, etc.

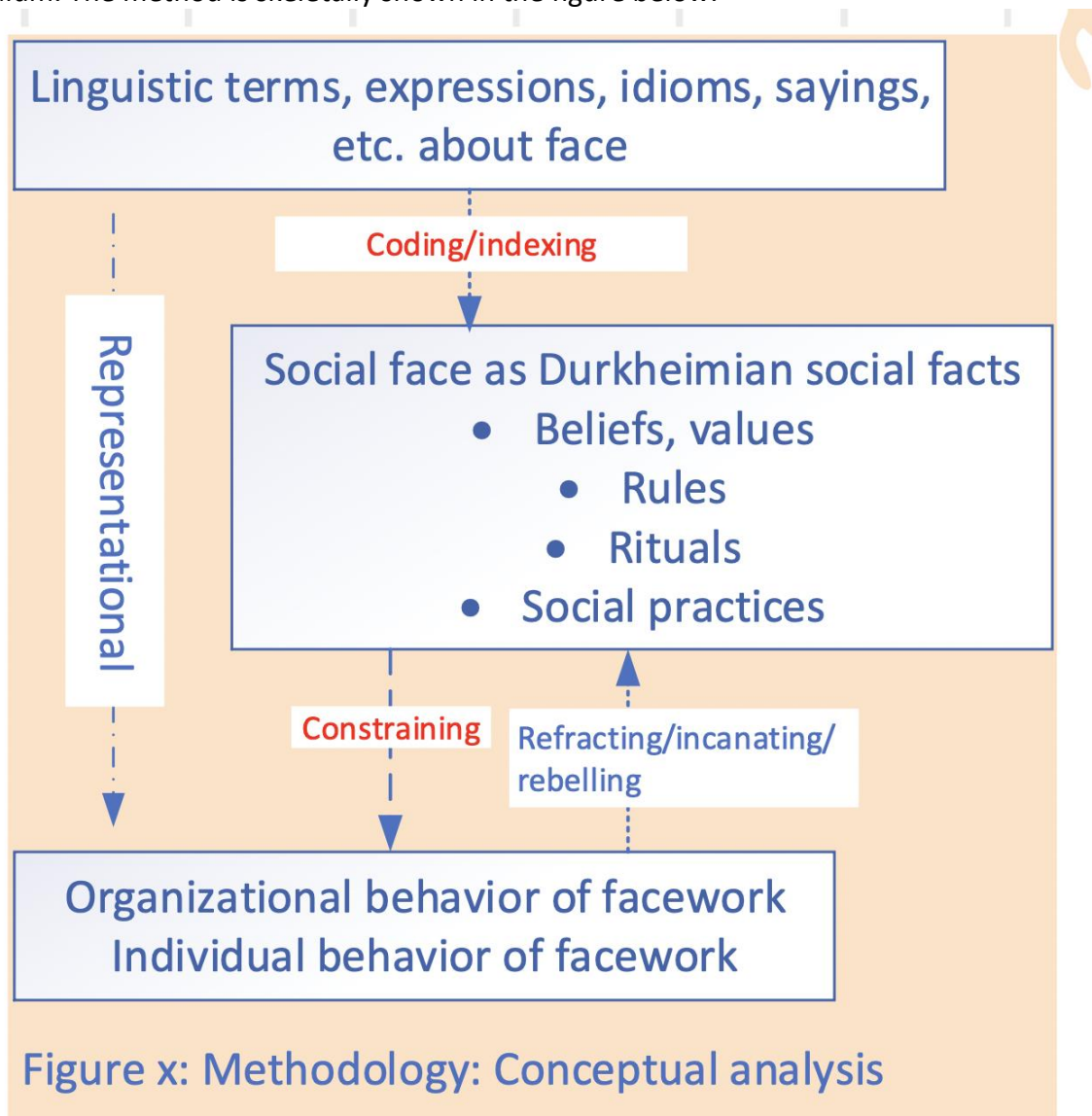
### Chinese face: a viable concept with great complexity

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The method of conceptual analysis is adopted in this talk. Its objective is to gain a verifiable understanding of Chinese face. Chinese face is a very viable concept with great complexity. Its viability is analogous to such concepts as living, baby-growing, etc. Its complexity will unveil itself to you as talk continues. Basically, it is substantiated in two forms,

- as social facts,
- as individual behaviours,

the two of which are semiotically represented with verbalization as the most potent medium. The method is skeletally shown in the figure below.



You can see the three main rectangles, top middle and bottom. These three are linked by the relations between the linguistic terms and organisational and individual face behaviour. The top rectangle, linguistic expressions, relating to social facts through coding, indexing, and social face is related to organisational behaviour face work through constraining, refracting, incarnating, rebelling.

### A real-life case demonstration

Let me first illustrate how the method is applied to a case of suicide due to

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the loss of face, viz. loss of *lian*. It took place on January 22, 2022, about 15:30, in Southern Railway Station, Shanghai. A 55 year-old man suddenly approached the police station and told the guard that he had taken poison to kill himself. He handed the guard his last prior-death letter and fell to the ground. The web page wraps up the report with this summary:

经了解，这名男子今年 55 岁，年前专门来看望在上海工作的儿子，因儿子年龄较大仍没对象，感觉在村里丢脸 [loss of *lian*] 遂产生喝农药轻生的念头。看到武警执勤男子就想让武警将遗书交给家人，于是发生了上面一幕。

The man's letter, his talk with the guard, and the web page report of the incident are verbal representations; the man's taking poison to kill himself is an individual behaviour of face-saving type; and the Durkheimian social facts include:

- (1) the deep-seated Confucian belief that sons should have offspring for the continuity of family
- (2) the vernacular value that sons producing offspring give their parents *lian*.

The investigation of Chinese face, as shown in the conceptual model, can be conducted on three separate layers, viz.

- a) the semiotic
- b) the social, and
- c) the behavioural.

The semiotic layer is a linguistic study of semiotic resources of face representations. The social layer is a cultural-sociological-philosophical study. The behavioural layer is a fieldwork-based psychological study.

## Recap

Each layer investigation has its strength and weakness. An integrated approach is most desirable but is costly both mentally and money-wise. In the remainder of my talk, I shall touch upon each layer one by one just to give you a taste of Chinese face on each layer.

## 5 The semiotic layer

For the semiotic layer, I focus on three clusters of key words about:

- A. *ren* 人 (personhood)
- B. *mianzi* 面子, and
- C. *lian* 脸

I draw instances of their usage from two orthographic corpora:

- A. 新青年 *The New Youth* and
- B. 人民日报 *The People's Daily*.

*The New Youth* is the magazine edited famously by Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) and other pioneers during the May 4th Movement (1919). All together it published 63 issues over 11 years from 1915 to 1926. *The People's Daily* corpus is quite comprehensive, including all the issues from its inaugural in 1946 up to the year 2020. The size of the two corpora is about 5 hundred million in character. Tables 1-3 summarize 80 lexical items as search keywords and their instances found in *The People's Daily* Corpus. The 80 keywords are semantically arranged in two opposing columns.

### The *ren* 人 cluster

Table 1a: Ren-Cluster --- 28 items in 2 opposite columns

人 (personhood)			
体面人 (Model Conduct Person) $\Sigma$ 142279		失体人 (Ill Conduct Person) $\Sigma$ 24357	
做人	11126	丢人	1028
争光	5508	不丢人	99
光宗耀祖	137	真丢人	28
感到光荣	646	出丑	545
自豪	199	闹笑话	110
荣耀	2753	出洋相	126
荣誉	45959	无地自容	202
名誉	17638	失态	158
信誉	6484	得罪人	1879
声誉	8399	下不了/来台	133/+45
名声	3826		
(知)廉耻	431	面目	16773
(懂)礼仪	7317	嘴脸	3231
(讲)礼貌	5746		
自尊/+心	7782		
尊严	18328		

Table 1b: Ren-Cluster --- 12 items in 2 opposite columns

人情 (renqing)			
Model Conduct $\Sigma$ 4875		Ill Conduct $\Sigma$ 1218	
讲人情	167	不讲人情	54
懂人情	11	不懂人情	17
送人情	216	不近人情	419
托人情	121	不送人情	4
体面	3977	不体面	408
讲情面	383	不讲情面	316

### The *mianzi* 面子 cluster

Table 2: Mianzi-Cluster --- 23 items in 2 opposite columns

面子 (Mianzi) (6761 occurrence)			
Model Conduct $\Sigma$ 4942		Ill Conduct $\Sigma$ 1174	
顾面子	61	不丢面子	19
有面子	313	挽回面子	51
看面子	20	丢面子	472
要面子	190	没面子	195
给面子	81	撕面子	2
争面子	26	撕破面子	4
讲究面子	7	驳面子	6
撑面子	23	撕开面皮	3
爱面子	201	撕破面皮	13
留面子	38	打破面皮	1
碍面子	5	不/伤/损体面	408
讲/顾/…体面	3977		

### The *lian* 脸 cluster

Table 3: Lian-Cluster --- 17 items in 2 opposite columns

脸 (Lian)			
Model Conduct	Σ 1976	Ill Conduct	Σ 2468
争脸	13	不要脸	191
要脸	255	撕破脸	130
露脸	388	没脸	157
有脸	332	丢脸	898
颜面	368	打脸	98
脸面	620	脸皮厚	36
		厚着脸皮	268
		撕破脸皮	83
		翻脸	305
		打肿脸充胖子	243
		死皮赖脸	59

### Summary

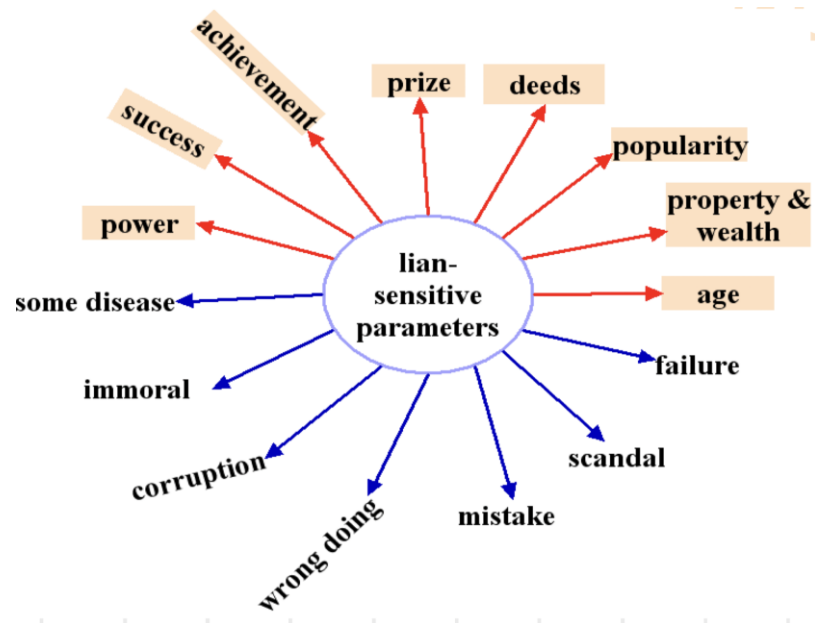
The complexity of Chinese face is anatomized in terms of the ensuing sub-concepts:

- 1) Lian/mian attribute concepts: ownership (as indexed by 有/没), positivity in value (as indexed by 体面、脸面), vulnerability (as indexed by 丢脸、撕破脸、打脸), etc.
- 2) Lian/mian action concepts: attainability (as indexed by 争脸、要面子、露脸、爱面子 transferability (as indexed by 给面子、看面子), etc.
- 3) Lian/mian moral concepts: personhood (as indexed by 争光、丢人、名誉、出丑), etc.
- 4) Lian/mian emotion concepts: pride (as indexed by 自豪、荣耀), shame (as indexed by 出洋相、无地自容), etc.

Lian/mian triggering-event concepts: Any event touching the lian-sensitive parameters evokes lian-events, viz. facework and propriety are called for. Sayings and maxims are action concepts in the sense that they are very potent in motivating people to act accordingly. They are 人有脸，树有皮；有来无往非礼也；礼尚往来；滴水之恩，涌泉相报；有恩必报；己所不欲勿施于人, among many others.



Events triggering *lian* 脸



Events triggering *mianzi* 面子



6 The behavioral layer

Lian-mian concern in diplomacy – The Hong Kong handover 1997

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To the Chinese side, China had lost its *lian* (脸) for a hundred years. The handover marked the occasion when it regained its *lian*. It took a great diplomatic genius to handle *lian* and *mianzi* issues. Take for instance the introduction of VIPs. The Chinese initially insisted that the Chinese VIPs should be introduced first. The British insisted that the British VIPs should be the first. Remember, this is a priority issue. The British argument goes like this: Before the British VIPs were introduced, Hong Kong was still a British colony! The Chinese argued that the occasion was a handover. The Chinese acted like a host. Eventually a deal was struck as follows: In the English version, the British VIPs were the first to be introduced followed by the Chinese. In the Chinese version, the Chinese VIPs were the first, followed by the British!

Take the sequential priority for another example. The British side insisted that Chris Patten should be the first to walk to the stage, with Prince Charles the last. This should be matched up with on the Chinese side. This turned out to be totally unacceptable. Eventually a deal was struck :The British and the Chinese followed its own way.

### Central vs. side entrance/exit

Following the Opium War in the late 1840's there was once a tough negotiation between the last Qing Dynasty and the British delegation. When the British delegation first arrived, it was shown in through the main door. The British got an upper hand on the Chinese during the negotiation. As a revenge, the British delegation was shown out through the side door. Li Hongzhang was later said to have won a small victory by not giving the Brits *mianzi*.

### Lian-mian concerns in business transactions – the nuanced role of face in Chinese business culture

Cardon made a detailed study and pointed out:

It is critical that businesspersons understand the nuanced role of face in Chinese business culture. The fact that face plays a dominant and even central role in Chinese social relations is well established ... (Cardon, 2009: 20)

Here's another instance:

... the face issues that arose during a ten-day visit to a British company by a group of six Chinese business people who were customers of the British company. The British company had previously hosted many such delegations, yet this particular visit turned out to be particularly problematic: the visitors cancelled all the training sessions that had been arranged, they asked to change hotels twice, and they were dissatisfied with the sightseeing programme. .... What should have been a harmonious and enjoyable visit turned out to be acrimonious and unpleasant. (Spencer-Oatey and Jing, 2000: 272)

Why was that the case? Face issues were not handled properly.

### Lian-mian concerns in rituals and ceremonies – mianzi in seating arrangements in business transactions

This is another example from a business case:

The welcome meeting took place that next morning in the host company's conference room. Six Chinese visitors were present, and six British hosts, along with a local interpreter (of Chinese nationality). The room was rather small in size, and

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had a large oblong table placed in the middle of the room. There were four chairs on either side, and a fifth at one end of the table (the end that was further away from the door). Four Chinese visitors sat on one side (facing the door) and two sat on the other side with the interpreter. One seat was left empty. The British chairman of the meeting sat at the end of the table, and the other British staff were located away from the table, with most either standing or sitting behind the Chinese visitors (see Figure 13.1).

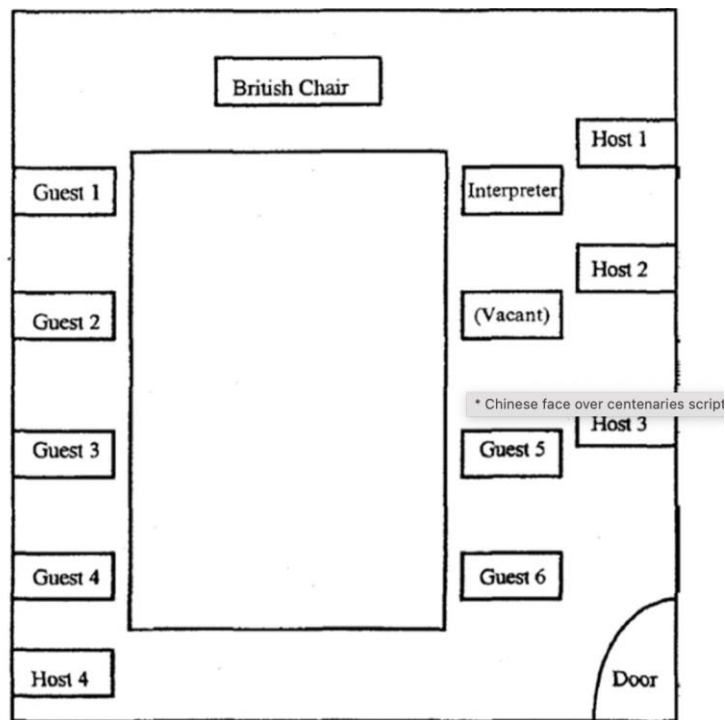


Figure 13.1 Seating arrangements at the meetings

The whole visit turned out to be a disaster due to lian issues.

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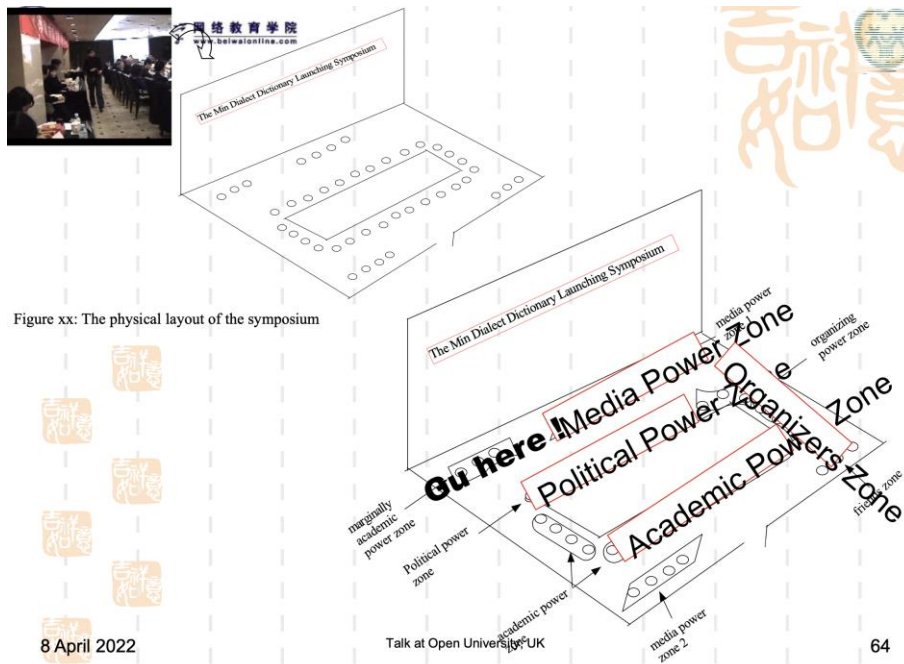


Figure xx: The physical layout of the symposium

So, what were these issues? There were more ‘mianzi’ on stage than down stage. More people on the stage get more mian. Then there is more mian in the centre than at the back. These are the rules.

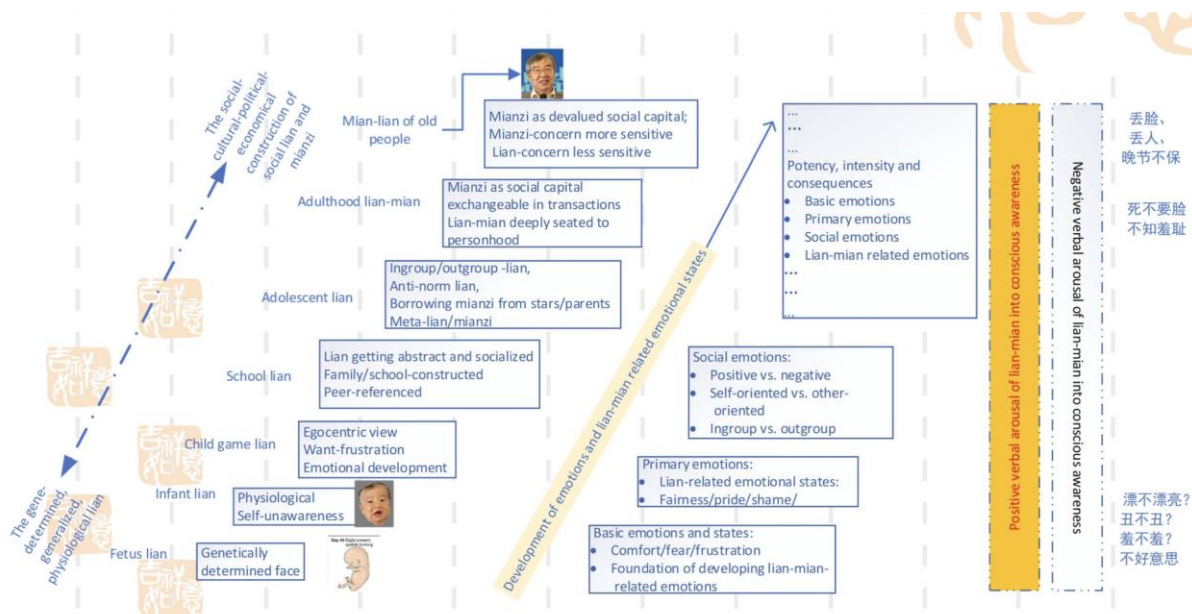
## Lian-manzi concern over lifespan

Do children have *mian*? Well that depends. Two weeks ago (2008) my son William came home after school, beaming with pleasure and pride. Mum asked him what had made him so happy. Here is his reply: The Nike sports shoes I gave him have made him *lou lian le* (露脸了) at school i.e. displaying a big *lian*.

## The rear end of lifespan

On the rear end of lifespan, the picture is even more complicated. One surfs web pages by key words such as deception 骗 and fraud 诈骗, and often comes across the message that it is the cohort of old people who are the most vulnerable. In our study of deception and financial fraud we interviewed a dozen of old people victims about their personal experience. *Lian-mian* concern is the first hurdle we had to overstride. It is a shame or *diu ren* to become a victim, and add a further shame if the deception was leaked to their offspring that they have lost their savings.

## Lian-mian related emotions over the lifespan



Infants have *lian* but they don't have *mian*. When they get older they gradually get *lian* and *mian*. Just like me!

## 7.1 The social fact layer: has Chinese lian-mian changed its face in parallel with the changing China?

### A contrastive study

Instead of abstract discussion, I'd like to demonstrate the change with concrete instances. Zhu Jianhua (朱建华) was once China's household name. He won a gold medal for high jump in the 23rd Olympic Games held in 1984. He thus became a national symbol of China's leap to prosperity (中华崛起的象征). He was invited to deliver public talks to boost the national morale. He attained great lian-status. What is significant is that his personal lian is transferable to his family, friends, neighbours, and even to the city dwellers. He was requested to grant mianzi to friend's weddings. Some even asked him to use his mianzi to buy railway tickets for them because at that time railway tickets were very difficult to come by.

In 2018, Wu Dajing won the Olympic gold medal for men's 5000m short track speed skating and in 2022 he has just won an Olympic gold medal in the 2000m mixed relay short track speed skating.

I did a comparison of these two Olympic champions in terms of their lian and mian and the table below shows my findings. The parameters were the same. There were no absolute differences in lian-mian between 1984 and 2022, however, there were differences in degree.

		朱建华	武大靖
lian	achievement	✓	✓
	prize	✓	✓
	popularity	✓	✓
	wealth	✓	✓
	deeds	✓	✓
	power	✓	✓
	success	✓	✓
	age	✓	✓
mianzi	quality	✓	✓
	quantity	✓	✓
	accessibility	✓	✓
	availability	✓	✓
	priority	✓	✓
	centrality	✓	✓
	publicity	✓	✓
	talking-vs-doing	✓	✓

## 8. Chinese-ness of Chinese face: some everlasting beliefs and values

### Beliefs and values upheld by the majority

1. Social harmony: Don't impose on others what you don't want yourself (己所不, 勿施于人) and the principle of personal ethics and conduct (和为贵)
2. Social order of *li* (礼) based on interpersonal relations: 以礼仪为基础的人际关系
3. Social justice of reciprocity: *renqing* 人情, *bao* 报, 礼尚往来
4. Familial role in social organisation and production 家国情怀

There have been no changes in the four fundamental beliefs and values and that is why Chinese face is still there.

### Chinese face: Life vs. AI ?



Thank you!