

THE CHINESE CONCEPT OF FACE: A PERSPECTIVE FOR BUSINESS COMMUNICATORS

Qiumin Dong

Department of English
New Mexico State University
P.O. Box 30001, MSC 3E
Las Cruces, NM 88003
qiumind@nmsu.edu
(505) 646-3931

Yu-Feng L. Lee

Department of Economics and International Business
New Mexico State University
MSC 3CQ, P.O. Box 30001
Las Cruces, NM 88003-8001
wlin@nmsu.edu
505-646-4662
Fax: 505-646-1915

ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the research of business communication in cross-cultural contexts. It investigates the Chinese concept of *face* that prevails in Chinese society and analyzes how it impacts business people's attitude and behavior accordingly. Using Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and China as sample Chinese culture, the article discusses how *face* corresponds to Hofstede's cultural dimensions: long-term versus short-term orientation, individualism versus collectivism, high versus low power distance, strong versus weak uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity versus femininity. Our empirical findings indicate that Chinese concept and use of *face* are relevant and compatible with most components in the Hofstede framework. However, we suggest that Western business practitioners understand the uniqueness and complexity of Chinese culture so as to pay special attention to the inter-linkage between Chinese *face* and the dimensions of uncertainty avoidance and masculinity.

Keywords: *face*, Chinese culture, business communication, cultural dimensions

Introduction

Face is an important Chinese cultural concept that has penetrated every aspect of the Chinese life. As David Yau-fai Ho (1976), the first Asian to serve as the President of the International Council of Psychologists says, *face* is "a concept of central importance because of its pervasiveness with which it asserts its influence in social intercourse. [As a result,] it is virtually

impossible to think of a facet of social life to which the question of face is irrelevant” (883). As today’s technology and economy change the world into a global village, business people who currently operate/plan to launch businesses in the Asian market, specifically in China, must be aware of the influence of *face* on business communication. In this article we first describe how the Chinese business people conceptualize *face* and communicate accordingly. We then discuss how this concept corresponds to Geert Hofstede (1994)’s five cultural dimensions: long-term versus short-term orientation, individualism versus collectivism, high versus low power distance, strong versus weak uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity and femininity.

The Concept of Face

Scholars have offered various definitions of *face*. Coggin and Coggin (2001) define it as a mixture of an individual’s self-respect and confidence (see also the definition on dictionary.com); Leung and Chen (2001) believe *face* is “the respect, pride, and dignity of an individual as a consequence of his/her social achievement and the practice of it” (1575). Professional communication scholar, St. Amant (2001) explains it to be “an individual’s external public appearance” (387). Cardon and Scott (2003) conclude that “face relates to a person’s image and status within a social structure” (10). While most of the definitions here are straightforward, the definition of Ho (1976) best shows the complexity of the Chinese concept of *face*: “the respectability and/or deference that a person can claim for him/herself from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in the social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in the position as well as acceptably in his social conduct” (883).

Face has multiple and varied characteristics. For example, the amount of *face* used by a company can be altered when its market share or quality of its products and/or service change(s). *Face* can also be traded. When business people want to enter a particular market that they are neither familiar with nor have status in, they seek assistance from a third party whose connections and status allow him/her to introduce the business to the market. The third party/person thus uses *face* to function as a go-between. It is crucial for foreign business entities to realize that Chinese frequently use this strategy of “borrowing *face*” to achieve mutual benefit.

The mutuality nature of *face* is probably the most important characteristic. Saving one’s own *face* and giving *face* to the partners are effective strategies to enhance communication and cooperation. In business situation, common *face*-losing conduct may include directly addressing conflict, demonstrating anger and criticizing the others in public, and not treating other people appropriately (Cardon and Scott, 2003). In fact, many Chinese are so sensitive to saving/losing *face* that they consider it a very serious matter. Giving *face* to others is widely held and the giver tends to expect reciprocity from the receiver. It indicate why the Chinese four-character idiom *li shang wang lai* (Rite/Respect is reciprocal.) is so popular in both everyday life and business communication. The appropriate way to give your business partner *face* involves frequently mentioning the partner’s accomplishment, avoiding directly mentioning business issues in public, and treating your partner with appropriate etiquette such as giving a gift. An example that shows not giving *face* may be the hecklings that occurred at the Chinese president Hu Jintao’s welcoming ceremony on the south lawn of the White House upon his official visit to the United States on April 20, 2006. Hu’s speech was disrupted by a member of the Falun Gong religious sect which is outlawed by the Chinese government. Americans may not consider it a serious

matter because they believe that everybody should have the freedom of speech regardless of how the Chinese public views Falun Gong and/or that the heckler abused her right as a reporter. However, Chinese might consider it negligence on the part of the U.S. at its best but disrespect at the worst, specifically in such a formal situation. Another *face* damaging/not giving *face* example also happened at the ceremony: the misidentification of China's anthem when the announcer said the band would play the "national anthem of the Republic of China", the official name of Taiwan that China considers a province. Although President Bush apologized later in his office, yet "[s]uch a jarring disruption inside the White House gates is extremely rare and seen as deeply offensive to the protocol-sensitive Chinese leadership" (Milbank, 2006).

Western business people may not understand *face* in the context of Chinese culture. They perceive Chinese as being too preoccupied with *face* to be "rational." Such a misunderstanding of the complex dynamics of *face* in China, and thus mismanagement of cross-cultural interactions, according to Kim and Nam (1998), may result in strained business relationships and loss of business opportunities. In terms of the disruption of Hu's welcoming ceremony and misidentification of China's anthem, they will not necessarily affect Hu Jintao's standing, but may "negatively affect his image of the United States" (Shi, 2006). It was reported by Milbank (2006) that, on the next day after Hu's welcoming ceremony, "Hu was in no mood to make concessions. In negotiations, he gave the U.S. nothing on delicate matters such as the nuclear problems in North Korea and Iran, the Chinese value and the trade deficit with China" (A02). According to Shi (2006), the incident obviously would not leave a good impression because Hu cares about his image. This indicates that misunderstanding of cultural practice does lead to negative impact although various other factors affect the result of the US-China negotiation.

Researchers believe that Chinese society continues to be influenced by Confucian legacy which affects how modern Chinese interact and communicate with other people (Hall, 1989; Varner and Beamer, 2001; Hofstede, 2001; Tranden-Turner and Trompenaars, 2000; Samovar and Porter 2004; Heisay, 2000; Dragga, 1999). Confucianism focuses on social harmony, stability, and hierarchy. A *junzi* (a righteous person) must treat his superiors with *li* (respect/ritual; *li mao dai ren*), persuade and convince people with *li* (*yi li fu ren*), but never attempt to gain *li* by using aggressive remarks (*qiang ci duo li*) so as to maintain enduring relationships and social networks. This indicates why every government in Chinese history emphasizes harmony and unity. Today, people still consider it a great virtue and achievement for individuals who are able to maintain a harmonious relationship with superiors, peers, and those who are lower in rank.

While the Chinese concept of *face* has its roots to Confucianism for social harmony through maintaining appropriate interpersonal relationships and networks, it is obviously relevant to Hofstede (1994)'s cultural value dimensions namely long-term orientation, collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity.

Having summarized the spirit of Confucianism, in the following section we report the cultural dimensions of Hofstede framework. The Chinese concept of *face* will be discussed and related to Hofstede model. To properly conduct the analysis, four sample Chinese economies including China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore are used. Meanwhile, cultural dimension statistics of the U.S., Asia, and the world as a whole are also included for country/regional comparison. The source of Hofstede statistics is retrieved from ITIM International (2006) website.

Hofstede Framework: Five Cultural Dimensions

Primarily five cultural dimensions are included in the Hofstede framework: long- versus short-term orientation, individualism versus collectivism, high versus low power distance, strong versus weak uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity and femininity.

(1) Long- versus short-term orientation

According to Hall et al. (2004), this dimension “reflects the extent to which a society has a pragmatic and future-oriented perspective rather than a conventional, historic, or short-term point of view” (491). Wild et al. (2006) refer it to “achievement versus nurturing”, indicating the extent to which a culture emphasizes personal achievement and materialism versus interpersonal relation and quality of life. A culture scoring high on this dimension tends to be classified more by long-term orientation, personal assertiveness, and materialism (i.e. accumulation of wealth). On the other hand, a low culture score implies generally short-term focus, more relaxed lifestyle, and less material gain.

(2) Individualism versus collectivism

This dimension pertains to the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups, where high score indicates individualism. In an individualistic culture, people tend to have a loose tie with others, value hard work and promote entrepreneurial risk-taking, therefore foster invention and innovation, while people in the collectivistic society are expected to integrate themselves into strong, cohesive in-groups with persistent loyalty (see Wild et al. 2006).

(3) High versus low power distance

This dimension refers to the equality of power distribution in a society or within a family. The higher the index presented in a culture, the less equal the power is distributed. In a high power distance society, noticeable inequality is normal between superiors and subordinates. Meanwhile, organizations tend to be more hierarchical with power originating from prestige, force, and inheritance. For culture with low power distance, prestige and rewards are more equally shared within organizations.

(4) Strong versus weak uncertainty avoidance

This dimension reflects a society’s tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. A strong uncertainty avoiding culture (i.e. high score on this dimension) implies frequent threats of uncertainty; consequently, people in this culture are more conservative and less likely to take risks. In business environment, turnover among employees tends to be lower, and employees’ behavior is regulated with more formal rules. Changes in organizations are more difficult to implement. A culture scoring low (i.e. with weak uncertainty avoidance) tends to endow with fewer rules and has a greater level of tolerance for different ideas, thoughts, and beliefs.

(5) Masculinity versus femininity

This dimension refers to the distribution of roles between genders. A masculine society with high score on this index indicates both men and women to be more assertive and competitive while in a feminine culture (with low score) people are more caring and modest.

Comparison and Relevance: Hofstede Framework and Chinese Concept of Face

To properly discuss Chinese concept of *face*, we combine it with Hofstede framework and the assessment of all sample economies. First, from the first panel of Figure 1, scores of both Asian Average and the four economies except Singapore are significantly higher than that of the U.S., indicating their future-oriented culture and strong value toward long-term relationships.

Applying to Chinese use of *face*, if one is able to save his/her own *face* while giving *face* to his/her partners, s/he gains credibility and will build a harmonious relationship in future interaction or communication. Western business people who understand and practice the concept of *face* effectively most likely can establish long-term partnerships with the Chinese entities.

On the second panel, indices of the four economies and the U.S. are extremely dichotomous. The high individualism in U.S. indicates individualistic attitudes and loose bonds in its society; whereas, in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, collective societal nature is highly valued where differing duties arise from the different status one holds in relation to others.

Face is collective, not individual for Chinese. Children are taught not to lose the family *face* when they are very young. Angry parents would often say “You’ve lost all our *face*,” when they believe their children have failed their expectations or done something wrong. An employee’s error may cause the company to lose *face*. Similarly, an individual’s achievement is not just considered an honor for him/herself, but more so for the family, the community s/he functions in, and even the whole country. Therefore, it is not surprising that Yao Ming, the basketball player, is hailed as a hero in his team in Shanghai, China where he came from, as well as in the entire country because Chinese believe that his achievement has enhanced *face* for his family, community, and the whole country. The Chinese people may consider the disruption of Hu’s speech and the misidentification of China’s anthem a great disrespect and evidence of not giving *face* because Hu does not only represent himself; rather, he represents the entire China. While business people from individualist cultures tend to overlook the importance of giving *face* in a collective culture (Beamer and Varner 2001), their counterparts in China have long since used titles, recognized special achievements/expertise, and praised a job well done when they interact with their clients as a sign of respect to make their partner “look and feel good”.

The third panel suggests that, as compared with the U.S, the four Chinese communities are lengthily immersed in power disparity where strong hierarchy prevails in all aspects of social life. *Face* is hierarchical for Chinese. Great importance is placed on status and ranks, which means an individual’s amount of *face* relies largely on the social position s/he holds. The higher the rank is, the more *face* the individual possesses, and the more likely s/he will be given *face*. Typically, a son will not argue with his parents in public, nor will an employee with the supervisor so as to give *face* and pay respect. Business people from individualist cultures should realize that offending an important person in a Chinese business means offending the entire company, the result of which may mostly be the loss of business opportunities.

From our observation in Panel Four, strong uncertainty avoidance is found in Taiwan while the other three Chinese societies show significantly weaker uncertainty avoidance. Their scores are also evidently lower than those in the U.S., Asian and World Averages. We find a surprising conflict in the case of China where its non-democratic regime leads us to believe its uncertainty avoidance index should be greater. In general, we assume that this low index may have some aspects to link with the “harmonious interpersonal relationship” of the Confucian teaching.

The Chinese concept of *face* with multiple characteristics and functions proves to be an effective way to establish and maintain long-term business relationship that will benefit both sides by means of greater tolerance for different thoughts and opinions. For example, Western business

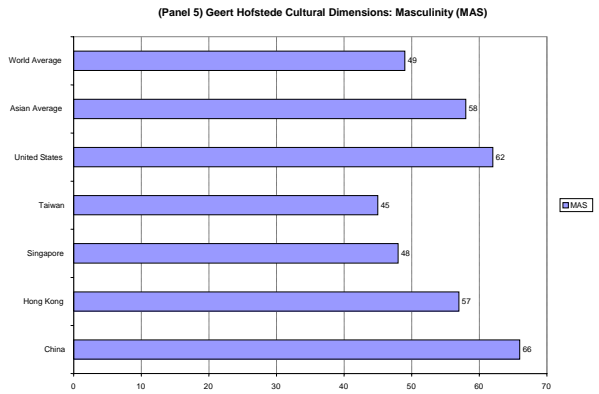
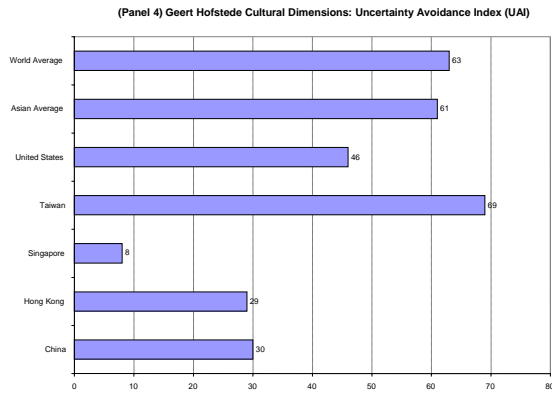
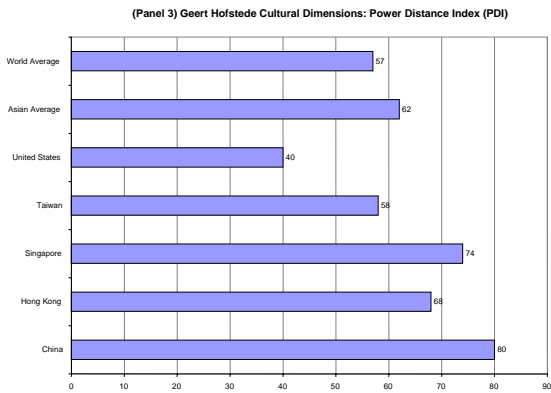
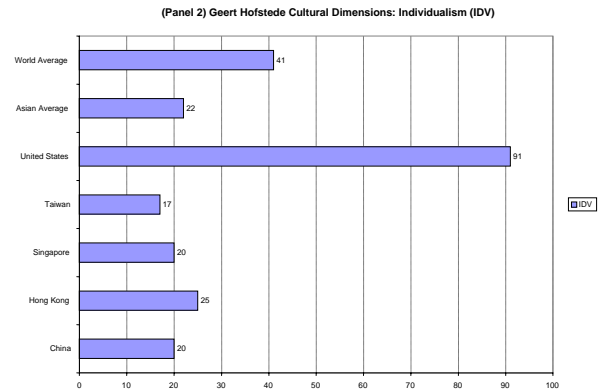
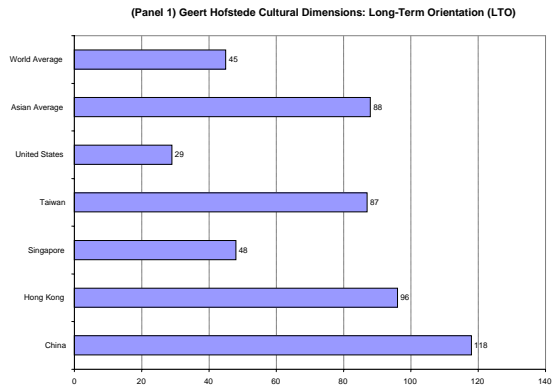
people may often hear Chinese partners say “Maybe”, or “I’ll think about it”, or “We’ll see” to indicate negative replies. Instead of saying “No” directly, they create uncertainty and ambiguity so as to tolerate different ideas and avoid business conflicts.

Finally, the indices in the last panel of Figure 1 disclose a comparatively lower level of masculinity on the part of Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong. China shows the highest degree among all. This is not unexpected because China, as a historically male-dominated society, has always valued patriarchy and male social roles. However, Confucian emphasis on societal harmony has endowed Chinese culture with a feminine nature, such as giving/saving *face* to respect others while remaining modest on one’s own. Therefore, we suggest that Western business people consider this unique complexity of Chinese culture when practicing their business in the Chinese markets.

Concluding Remarks

Face is a cultural concept that has been influencing the Chinese life for thousands of years. Business people use this concept to develop business networks based on reciprocal obligations and benefits. In this study, we analyze multiple facets of *face* and their connection to Geert Hofstede’s cultural dimension model including: long-term versus short-term orientation, individualism versus collectivism, high versus low power distance, strong versus weak uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity and femininity. In our empirical findings, we found that most of these connections are relevant and compatible. However, we suggest Western business practitioners pay special attention to the inter-linkage between Chinese *face* and the dimensions of uncertainty avoidance and masculinity.

Figure 1: Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions: Country Comparison



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