

# Conflict Analysis and Coping Strategies for Face Perception in Cross-cultural Communication

Runwu Huang

School of Foreign Languages, West China Normal University, Nanchong, Sichuan, China

## Abstract

**In modern society, economic globalization and cultural integration continue to deepen. People from different cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and geographic environments undertakes more frequent exchanges in the context of global integration. Take the Chinese view of face as the research starting point, there are many differences between China and the West, especially the face culture. As a social psychological phenomenon, face plays an important role in people's Cross-cultural communication and their behavior in these social activities and speech acts. In order to achieve effective and smooth Cross-cultural verbal communication, it is necessary to truly understand and master the respective characteristics and differences of Chinese and Western "face" cultures. Based on the analysis of reasons for different face culture, essential coping strategies are put forward for avoiding face conflict.**

## Keywords

**Face Perception; Cultural Differences; Coping Strategies; Cross-cultural Communication.**

## 1. Introduction

With the continuous development of the times, the world pattern is becoming more and more integrated economically. In this context, the development of cultural diversity closely connects people. Taking China as an example, many international companies require inoffensive Cross-cultural exchanges. In fact, due to the lack of Cross-cultural awareness of different cultural origins and social traditions, the of cultural conflict has become an obstacle in socio-economic and cultural exchanges. In the context of economic globalization, Cross-cultural exchanges are becoming more and more important, which is mainly reflected in cultural exchanges and economic development. However, there are many differences in cultures and customs in different countries, which is determined by the cultural origin and development characteristics of different countries. It is becoming increasingly clear that these cultural differences cannot be eliminated and may be avoided by improving the awareness of cultural differences and the ability of Cross-cultural communication. One of the cultural differences that need to be considered and paid attention to is the "face" culture between China and the West. Some studies have shown that, in Cross-cultural communication, face conflict caused by face cultural differences is the main reason for communication failure. In order to better promote Cross-cultural exchanges, we should more specifically understand the differences between Chinese and western face cultures, so as to better promote the relationship between China and the West. Face culture is a common phenomenon in Chinese and Western cultures, and it is also a distinctive reflection of specific cultural values in language under the background of cultural diversity. As a complex phenomenon of social psychology, it is involved in the process of Cross-cultural communication. The process of intercultural communication plays an important role that cannot be ignored. Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon once mentioned in the book *Intercultural Communication* that "there is no faceless communication in human communication in the world". Therefore, it can be said that "face" culture exists in various

cultures and is extremely universal. However, due to the different cultural backgrounds and the different lifestyles, ways of thinking and values between China and the West, there are also certain differences in people's understanding of face culture, and it is these differences that will have a certain impact on the Cross-cultural communication between China and the West. In Cross-cultural communication, face is a very important part, but different countries have different views on face. If we want to successfully communicate with people, then it is very necessary to understand the outlook of face in different countries. It is very necessary to analyze the "face perception" of different countries in Cross-cultural communication.

## 2. Definition of "Face"

The concept of face was first proposed by Goffman in 1967. In 1987, Brown and Levinson put forward the "face theory" in the book "Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage", dividing face into positive face and negative face, inheriting and developing Grice's cooperation principle and Goffman's the concept of "face". The well-known American sociologist Irvin Goffman put forward a famous theory of face behavior in the late 1950s, comprehensively discussing the concept of "face", that is, face is a ritualized social interaction behavior. In 1978, British linguists Brown and Levinson further explored the issue of face. On the basis of the concept of "face" proposed by Goffman, the concept of "face" was deeply expanded, calling face as "A public self-image established for oneself, which can be damaged, maintained or enhanced through communication with others". The concept of face in China has a very long history and plays a significant role in traditional culture. Due to the influence of Chinese culture, the Chinese have their own understanding of their own face, and they advocate humility and harmony. Politeness is a symbol of human civilization, a tool to maintain interpersonal harmony, and a common phenomenon in all social groups. Everyone want others to realize what he has done, which is what people call the face. Face concept also has certain collective consciousness, which is likely to emphasize as a whole, such as the "face" of a country and a group of "child" and so on. In general, the face culture in our country is ubiquitous. Whether in life or work, this kind of face culture attaches great importance to the thoughts of others and often pays attention to safeguarding the face of others. Just like when the Chinese anthropologist Hu Xianjin introduced the "face" culture to Westerners, she once said: "The face of this culture represents a reputation for social value, and it has experienced its continuous success in life. And it promotes people's development. A higher position that gets a reputation is also a person who accumulates reputation through his own efforts."

## 3. Face Perception in China and the West

### 3.1. Face Perception in China

Chinese people take "face" into account on various occasions. They would avoid humiliation or embarrassment, and preserve dignity by all means." "Silver is like dung, and the face is worth a thousand dollars." These familiar words are integrated into the daily life of Chinese people. Chinese people attach great importance to face. Therefore, people value "face" and hope to get "face". The formation of "face" culture is interdependent. In China, it was Hu Xianjin who first proposed the concept of "face". Hu Xianjin believes that face has two interconnected points. They are: "Lian and Face". "Lian" refers to an individual who obeys certain moral codes in social life and thus has his own moral character. This commendable moral character has become a point that the public affirms. If you do not abide by social morality and violate social norms, you will shame. "Mian" is the reputation gained by improving oneself and making a certain contribution to the society. "Lian" and "mian" are related to each other. Hu Xianjin pointed out that "Mian" is social, and "Lian" is a moral thing.

Xu Lisheng believes that “the two parties in communication must take care of each other’s face, only in this way can interpersonal communication proceed smoothly”. “Mianzi” exists in people’s lives as a psychological feeling. People need to keep others’ face and maintain each other’s face so as to ensure communication. Through certain psychological constraints and social constraints to reduce the appearance of communication problems, to avoid conflicts and conflicts. People are happy to get face, and they are also happy to give face. This mutuality makes each other give face to each other, thus forming a Chinese-style “view of face.” People hope that their moral dignity can be upheld, so that they can gain the “face” they value. When they improve their abilities, they can accomplish something in society, and if they make contributions, they will gain reputation and earn a “face.” Chinese people often say: “Guangzong Yaozu (make one's ancestors illustrious), Guangyao Menmei (bring honor to the family name)”. Through their own efforts to gain face, and let others look at themselves and their family in admiration. These ideas are in people's lives. In China where the human relations network is developed, the mentality of “face” has also become a kind of glue to a certain extent. Face mentality strengthens the communication and connection with each other, which is conducive to the consolidation of feelings.

### 3.2. Face Perception in the West

As far as Western countries are concerned, they themselves attach great importance to personal privacy. They think that it is a polite expression of not involving others’ ideas and personal privacy at any time, which is quite different from our country’s concept. In the process of life and work, they will try their best not to cause bother or cause troubles to others, and allow others to reserve a certain amount of private space. This is also their own way of expressing respect for others. In the process of general communication, Westerners will also care about the “face” of others, and the phenomenon of preserving their own face will also occur. Westerners have relatively independent personalities and admire freedom very much. So in the process of daily communication, once others make mistakes, they will directly point out the problems of others. In this case, it is a manifestation of “losing face” for our country; however, if Westerners think that you have performed well, and they will praise you generously. This is an expression of “saving face” for our country.

In the eyes of Westerners, face emphasizes the individual as the center, that is, it emphasizes the independent development of people and promotes the honorable achievements of personal development.

They have developed an independent, open and free personality. Under this kind of personality, they pursue self-esteem, dare to express themselves, and advocate independence and freedom. In addition, they pay attention to protecting personal privacy and safeguarding personal power. Brown and Levinson believe that “people who engage in social activities in society are model persons, they have the need for face, and they hope to gain face in communication.” Westerners under individualism obtain it through their own performance. The right to speak in communication, express needs in communication, and maintain one's own face. The positive face level hopes to get other people’s affirmation and social recognition, while the negative face level hopes to avoid interference from others and fully realize personal leadership.

Whether in life or at work, they will regard themselves as the center, straightforwardly express their appeals, and separate the part from the whole. The success that an individual gets is the result of hard work, and has little to do with other factors. In this atmosphere, they are calm in dealing with things, and they will not go against their wishes because of the lack of “face”, and they will distinguish between public and private, and they will not involve too many human relationships. In the West, there is no such thing as “human sentiment is greater than the sky.” After all, “face” for them is their own struggle. People are equal to each other, and there is no

distinction between high and low. Although the relationship between each other is not too close, there is an appropriate space.

## **4. Reasons for Different "Face" Perceptions between China and West**

### **4.1. Thinking Modes and Value-orientation**

Chinese people like to consider a problem from the perspective of holistic analysis, and then partly pursue the harmonious dialectical unity between things, just like the opposite search for things. It is an indispensable whole, often emotional logic, so Chinese people like express their thoughts in an indirect way, and use indirect ways to preserve face. However, westerners' way of thinking is quite different from that of Chinese people. They like to consider a problem from the part first, and then consider the whole thing, which forms a different way of thinking from Chinese people from special to universal. Western people believe that it is crucial to maintain personal independence and autonomy when solving problems, so they hope that personal freedom will be respected. This feature is also reflected when communicating with others, and they pay attention to the maintenance of negative face.

Traditional Chinese culture has a tendency to group society, emphasizing the social nature of people, the harmony of interpersonal relationships, and the constraints of social norms on individuals, that is, focusing on the collective rather than the individual. Chinese people often demean themselves in order to save face for the other party and the collective. The thoughts of "benevolence" and "the Golden Mean" in Confucian culture have also had a subtle influence on people's thinking and concepts, such as "being merciful", "speaking face", "appreciating the face", "looking at the face of the Buddha without looking at the monk's face". Many "face" behaviors are deeply influenced by it.

On the other hand, Westerners' view of face is probably due to the influence of ancient Greek civilization, which emphasizes calling for freedom and democracy. With European and American cultures as prominent representatives of Western cultures, they advocate the independence of individuality and personality, emphasize the individual as the center, promote the establishment of personal achievements, and advocate fighting for personal honor. Under the guidance of cultural background, personal feelings have received a lot of attention and respect. As long as words and deeds in the world do not cause adverse effects on others or violate laws and regulations to hinder social development, all opinions can be determined by individuals, and individuals need to be responsible for their own decisions.

The cultural traditions of different value orientations determine that there are destined differences between the Chinese and Western "face" cultures in Cross-cultural communication. The positive face theory of Brown and Levinson believes that every rational person hopes to be praised and recognized by others. [6] This point can be described as vividly reflected in Chinese culture.

### **4.2. Collectivism VS Individualism**

Influenced by the 5000-year-old Chinese culture, the Chinese have developed a way of thinking about others. Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes the unity of nature and man, and the harmonious relationship between people. They believe that the unity of man and nature is the highest state. Ancient philosophers believed that the whole world is one and indivisible. Therefore, the Chinese way of thinking is more inclined to collectivism. Because of the collectivist way of thinking, Chinese people often praise others. Under the influence of Chinese traditional culture, Chinese people have developed the habit of nurturing face, and they will do their best to maintain face. Because they believe in God and believe in themselves, they will not try to harm others in order to obtain harmonious interpersonal relationships.

The Western environment emphasizes individualism. In ancient times, most of the West were nomads and they often lived in different places. However, generations of generations in our country have lived on the same land. In that context, Westerners are very independent from each other. It is difficult to form a neighborly relationship of mutual help. For this reason, Westerners' collective concepts will be relatively poor. Therefore, in the process of communication, Westerners will not be subject to any restrictions on their own behavior and speech as long as they do not disturb others, and they do not need to pay attention to the "face" of others. In addition, the most accepted thought by Westerners in the process of development is the idea of contract. In this context, no matter what kind of communication is to establish a contractual relationship in the line of sight, communication and practice are carried out, which does not require recognition.

### **4.3. Environmental Factors**

The formation of any culture is inextricably linked to objective reasons such as geographic environment. The unique characteristics of Chinese culture is directly related to China's geographic environment. The geographical environment of our country is relatively complicated. In ancient times, only simple vehicles such as horse-drawn carriages were connected to the outside world. This resulted in the stability of the ancient people's way of life and formed a relatively stable group relationship between people. The values of collectivism are also deeply imprinted in people's minds, thus affecting the "face" culture of Chinese people. People value other people's views of themselves, and collective "face" is very important.

The geographical environment of the West is quite different from that of China. They migrate more frequently, so their place of residence is not fixed. Under such environmental conditions, it is impossible to form a stable collective relationship. The collective consciousness is naturally weaker than that of the Chinese. , I don't care about the face of the group or others, everything is self-centered. In this environment, a Western culture dominated by individualism is formed.

## **5. Face Perception Learning in Improving Cross-cultural Communication**

### **5.1. Avoiding Embarrassing Occasions**

Refusal of verbal behavior is itself a face-threatening behavior. In order to reduce the degree of this threat and avoid the embarrassment of communication, different cultures will adopt different strategies to remedy face. Chinese society has an obvious concept of hierarchy, paying attention to the emperor, the father and the son, the elders and the young. Therefore, when rejecting others, especially those with higher social status and prestige than yourself, they behave very implicitly and euphemistically, paying special attention to the wording, tone, attitude and method of rejection, lest they damage the positive face of others. I often say: "Let me think about it" or "Let me think about it again" and other evasive words. Afterwards, you have to reply to others "Excuse me, I really can't do anything about this." However, Western countries believe that this kind of evasive rhetoric is a deception to others and is incomprehensible. When they encounter such a thing, even if they are superiors or elders, if they cannot help others' requests, they will say: "I'd like to but..." or "I'm sorry...". They generally express their rejection clearly and directly, express regret for this, and then state the reason for their rejection.

### **5.2. Strategies to Save Face in Cross-cultural Context**

First of all, because of the differences between the Chinese and Western "face" cultures, the establishment of Cross-cultural awareness in Cross-cultural communication is quite important. When communicating with Westerners, adopt an appropriate attitude of tolerance and understanding, respect their unique "face" culture, and require us to continuously cultivate our



own ability to flexibly respond to cultural diversity in the process of Cross-cultural communication.

Secondly, we should deeply understand the differences between Chinese and Western “face” culture. This difference is not only reflected in the theoretical connotation of “face”, but also in the values permeated by “face” culture, the most important of which is to realize that the Chinese “face” culture emphasizes the maintenance of positive face for individuals or collectives based on the hope to be recognized and supported by others, while the western “face” culture emphasizes the expression of actions in a more direct manner. Or the negative face culture based on goal pursuit.

Thirdly, we should understand the deep connotation that differences in cultural diversity will have different effects on the results of Cross-cultural communication. A seemingly inconspicuous communication message will be influenced by individuals from different cultural backgrounds in the transmission process, which may eventually make Cross-cultural communication successful, or it may lead to the failure of Cross-cultural communication. The “face” culture, as the ubiquitous existence of Chinese culture and Western culture in the process of communication, plays an important role in this process and cannot be ignored. Finally, participants in the Cross-cultural communication process need to combine the cultural differences between China and the West, and use respect, polite, humor, and tactful Cross-cultural communication important cultural strategies such as “face” to maintain the positive face and face of both parties. Negative face can relieve people’s cultural communication obstacles caused by the “face” problem, thereby effectively ensuring the harmonious exchanges between China and the West, so as to jointly create harmonious and harmonious interpersonal relationships.

## 6. Conclusion

In Cross-cultural communication, Chinese and Westerners have different attitudes toward “face”, and their behaviors vary accordingly, which stems from differences in thinking modes,value orientations and environmental factors between China and the West. The Chinese and Western “face” cultures are in two different domains, which influence each other and connect with each other in communication. Since the Chinese “face” culture is characterized by collectivism and high context, and the western “face” culture is characterized by individualism and low context, we will face differences in cultural values in Cross-cultural communication. Cultural conflicts appear, but different cultures have different values. What exists is reasonable. In communication, correct treatment of the “face” culture formed under different values, understanding, tolerance, for the Chinese and Western “face” culture, and understanding the laws of “face” psychology are important guarantees for orderly and smooth Cross-cultural communication.

## References

- [1] Austin.J.L. How to do Things with Words[M]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962: 156.
- [2] Brown. P. & Levinson. S. Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage [M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987: 257.
- [3] Edward T. Hall. Beyond Culture[M]. New York: Anchor Press,1976: 85-105.
- [4] Goffam, E. Essays 011 face to face behavior. Interaction ritual[M]. New York: Garden City,1967.
- [5] Leech. G. Principles of Pragmatics[M].London: Longman, 1983: 55.
- [6] Levinson. S. Pragmatics [M]. Cambridge: University Press,1983: 223.
- [7] Ron Scollon, Suzanne B K Scollon. Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach[M]. Maiden: Blackwell Publisher, 1995: 144.

- [8] Searle. J. R. Speech Act [M]. Cambridge: University Press,1969: 60-61.
- [9] Yueguo Gu. Politeness Phenomena in Modern Chinese[J]. Journal of Pragmatics 1990 (14): 237.
- [10] Mao. L. Beyond position theory: “face” revisited and re- viewed[J]. Journal of Pragmatics, 1994, (21): 451-486.