A Review on Mianzi in Interpersonal, Familial, and Business Settings

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Abstract: Face is one of the crucial cultural aspects in Chinese society, which can be separated into mianzi and lian. This article will focus on summarizing the concept of mianzi. It is tied to social occasions that require interpersonal communication between individuals and groups: face culture can be found in both workplaces and individual settings. Face culture is adopted as a primary social principle in China and it plays an important role in affecting the languages and behaviors of Chinese people. Thus, being able to understand the meaning of mianzi and behave accordingly is important for corporations that plan to do business in China and individuals who seek connection with Chinese society or culture in any form. This paper will summarize the most important facets of Chinese face culture regarding its role in interpersonal, familial, and business settings, as they are essential to the understanding of face culture.

Keywords: face, mianzi, guanxi, renqing, interpersonal relationship

1.   Introduction

Face culture has been an important Chinese cultural factor since ancient China, as it has existed for roughly over thousand and six hundred years [1]. It is incorporated into the daily lives of Chinese people of almost all age groups—from as young as a five-year-old kid to the elders. The merit to understand the concept of face culture had been highlighted by a considerable number of scholars in the field of sociology, as they claim that it will help with the progress of social science globally [2]. According to Goffman [3], face can be defined as 'the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact'. While mianzi is associated with the extrinsic status and material assets of a person [4, 5], it is an intricate concept that can hardly be understood by merely knowing its definition [1]. Though people often equate mianzi to the concept of dignity or prestige, it plays far more important effects in the Chinese collectivist society, as respecting others' mianzi is an unspoken social norm [6]. Such social hidden social norm is associated with the concept of "saving mianzi" and "losing mianzi"; while saving mianzi refers to the behavior of defending one's social dignity or prestige when an outer force threatens it [7], and such behavior can be oriented towards both oneself or others. On the other hand, losing mianzi is a passive instance when someone loses his or her social dignity or prestige [5]. Due to social pressure, it is often considered obliged by Chinese people to save face for both themselves and others and to prevent face-loss situations from happening [7]. Furthermore, not saving face for others or causing others to lose face are regarded as uncourteous behaviors and someone who

commits such behavior will risk losing his existing social networks because maintaining face for others is the ethics of Confucian society [6, 8]. This phenomenon can be seen in most interpersonal communications [9], especially in face-to-face casual settings and familial and business settings. These three settings are the most popular and representative of mianzi culture, as present researches related to face are mostly focused on or discusses them. However, no recent articles try to review and summarize mianzi culture from a broad enough perspective, as most of them focus on a partial facet of mianzi. This paper will summarize the role of face culture (mianzi) in the three most representative and common settings: interpersonal, familial, and business settings. Interpersonal settings mentioned in this paper will specifically be referred to non-familial and non-business interpersonal relationships.

2. Mianzi in Interpersonal, Familial, and Business Settings

2.1. An Overview of Mianzi, Guanxi, and Renqing

As has been mentioned previously, China is a collectivist society that adopts Confucian values [8]. Guanxi (interpersonal relationship in Chinese terms) is thus highly valued in Chinese culture. Renqing, a concept related to guanxi, is 'a form of social capital that provides leverage in interpersonal exchanges of favours' according to Yen [10]. As two important elements of guanxi, mianzi and renqing determine the improvement or deterioration of an interpersonal relationship [11, 12]. If two individuals conduct an equal exchange of renqing at a frequent rate, better guanxi tends to develop between them. Conversely, if the exchange is unequal (e.g., A does B a lot of favor, but B rarely offers his help when A comes to ask), or thought unequal by either one of the two persons, the result would be vice versa. On the other hand, a person who has mianzi (e.g., owing a great amount of wealth) will be considered a preferable target by others to build up or develop guanxi with [11], whereas a person who is lack mianzi tend to be labeled as "unwanted" in terms of interpersonal relationships. Moreover, the cause-effect relation between guanxi and mianzi and guanxi and renqing can also be reversed. If a person has established good guanxi with those around them (has managed well his social networks), he would also be recognized to have mianzi. Similarly, a person that has good guanxi with others can ask for renqing (seek favors) easier, because others would consider him or her a trustworthy person. Mianzi, renqing, and guanxi interact with each other and together serve as the fundamentals of interpersonal relationships in China.

2.2. Interpersonal Settings

2.2.1. Friendship

Friendships are formed on the basis of mutual appreciation [13]. Therefore, there must be an element or trait that one admires on the other person in order for them to stand a chance of becoming friends with each other. Mianzi is among one of the most decisive elements for friendship to take place in Chinese culture. According to the research done by Tsang and Wang [11], mianzi creates the inclination for starting a new friendship or reinforcing an old one. There are two possible reasons behind this. First, people tend to be drawn to individuals who have mianzi because those individuals are assumed capable of bringing potential benefits—people are motivated by the resources that those individuals possess (e.g., wealth, social status, social connections). Second, people may be attracted to those individuals because this will bring them mianzi. The reasoning behind this is that friendships are built on the basis of equal social status [14], which means being friends with a person of high social status affirms one's social status and will bring that person mianzi. In other words, if a person gets people to believe that he or she is friends with Bill Gates,

people will automatically assume that he or she also has a high social status despite that this might not be true. On the other hand, knowing how to save mianzi is crucial in maintaining or strengthening friendships [11]. Emotional quality is considered associated with the ability to save mianzi in Chinese culture [15]. Thus, making friends with people who know well of how to save mianzi may grant a person the feeling of being emphasized, which will in turn strengthen the sense of intimacy.

2.2.2. Romantic Relationship

Harmony and stableness are highly valued in Chinese traditional culture when it comes to romantic relationships due to Confucian values [16]. Many Chinese people believe that equal social status and wealth are crucial to maintain such harmony [17]. When he or she is not in the same social or economic status with the other person, they will be considered "unmatched", and the person with lower possessions will be seen as lack of mianzi. Although people can hardly do anything about their social status in a short period of time, in order to maintain mianzi in romantic relationships, they would purchase expensive gifts or buy meals for their partners, which are often behaviors beyond their abilities. Usually, males are more concerned with mianzi than females due to machismo (masculine pride) in Chinese culture [1], and are therefore more pressured by mianzi culture because they don't want to lose mianzi in front of their partners. Meanwhile, the physical attraction partners are also associated with mianzi. If a person's partner is good looking, he or she would have mianzi. On the contrary, if a person is in a relationship with a bad looking partner, he or she may lose face.

2.3. Familial Setting

Under the collectivist cultural context, Chinese people take family in high regard. Mianzi of the family is significant in Chinese culture. Family members are closely connected to each other, which means the mianzi of individual family members will affect the mianzi of the family—if a family member loses mianzi, then the entire family may be dishonored [7, 11]. Whereas, if a family member has or gains mianzi, the entire family will also gain mianzi. Hence, many Chinese parents would educate their children to gain them mianzi and warn their children to not let them lose mianzi. Three major things that would help gain mianzi for the family. First, academic success. Chinese parents put a lot of attentions to the academic life of their children. They often demand good grades in school and wish that their kids would get into a good college [18]. If their children fulfill their demands and wishes, the family would gain mianzi. Second, marring a nice wife would gain mianzi for the family, as the entry of a new member into the family who has mianzi will bring mianzi for the whole family. Third, career success will let the family gain mianzi because it gains mianzi for an individual. Conversely, behaviors such as consuming drugs, gambling, having inappropriate sexual relationships, and committing crimes will disgrace the family and cause the family to lose mianzi.

2.4. Business Setting

Mianzi is among one of the most important factors to consider when doing business with Chinese people [7]. Business involves massive communications. Since Chinese people are sensitive of their mianzi, it is important to prevent a business partner from losing mianzi—being embarrassed or shamed [19]. This means that direct criticisms should be avoid. Making a business partner lose mianzi will break the established guanxi [11], which may lead an end to business partnerships. On the other hand, knowing how to save mianzi and give mianzi in business settings can help strengthen business partnerships. If a person saves and gives mianzi for his business partners, he or

she would be considered well-mannered and courteous. His impressions may be boosted and others would find him or her a pleasant partner to work with.

3.   Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to summarize mianzi culture in interpersonal, familial, and business settings. Mianzi, together with guanxi and renqing, play an important role in Chinese culture, as they fundamentally influence the daily lives of Chinese people. It is embedded as a social norm in interpersonal communication. The ability to save mianzi, give mianzi, and prevent others from losing mianzi is crucial to successful interpersonal relationships and businesses. This paper implies that understanding mianzi as a sociocultural concept is important for non-Chinese people to build interpersonal, familial, and business connections in China; it also implies the potential danger of mianzi culture in causing excessive social pressures on the young generation. The major limitation for this paper is that it did not go into the discussion of details about mianzi. A more detailed review on mianzi culture from a broad perspective is thus recommended to fill in this gap. Another limitation to this paper is that it fails to address mianzi from the scope of the young generation in China. Mianzi culture in young generation should be addressed in future studies.

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