

English *face* and Chinese *liǎn/mi ànzi*

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Abstract

After consulting definitions as well as examples in dictionaries, and studying the research of Wang Li, Brown & Levinson, and other scholars in the field of Politeness, the author has found that Chinese face should not be divided into two types: *liǎn* 脸 and *mi ànzi* 面子. Research evidence shows that the conceptualization of these two different aspects of Chinese face is not valid.

Keywords: English, face, Chinese, *liǎn*, *mi ànzi*

1. Introduction

Through this study, Chinese face should not be divided into two types: *liǎn* 脸 and *mi ànzi* 面子, as some scholars have claimed. According to Wang Li, although there used to be those two forms in ancient Chinese, in Modern Chinese there is only one *lian* (face) for a person. He points out that in the old time, a person had two *liǎn*'s, unlike the modern man who has only one *liǎn*. Just as dignity, self-respect etc., they are synonyms of face in English. *Mi ànzi* has become one of the many synonyms of *liǎn* such as *liǎnmiàn* 脸面, *yánmiàn* 颜面, *mìnmù* 面目, *liǎnpí* 脸皮, *tǐmiàn* 体面, *qíngmiàn* 情面, etc. in modern Chinese.

The finding in this research that there is no Chinese-English divide in face despite differences coincides with Leech's "Despite differences, there is no East-West divide in politeness".

2. *liǎn* 脸 and *mi ànzi* 面子

There has been a general belief that Chinese face should be divided into two different types: *liǎn* and *mi ànzi*, therefore the notion of face in Chinese is different from that in Brown & Levinson's theory (Gu, 1990: 241; Mao, 1994: 454; Watts, 2003: 120; and Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003: 1462).

Some researchers claim that the distinction between *liǎn* and *mi ànzi* lies in the fact that the positive social value in the former is lower than that in the latter (Gu 1992: 13). Others further distinguish the two types of face by quoting Hu's definition that "*mi ànzi* stands for prestige or reputation, which is achieved through getting on in life." and "*liǎn* refers to the respect of the group for a man with a good moral reputation" (Mao, 1994: 454).

My impression through studies, however, is that this distinction of Chinese face does not seem to be valid. It is true that in ancient Chinese *liǎn* and *mi àn* were two

different notions. Wang (1993: 77) writes that the word *liǎn* originated in the South and North Dynasties (420-589AD) referring to the cheeks and especially referring to where women used cosmetics. So, a person did not have only one *liǎn* (face) but had two *jiàn* (cheeks). Note the pronunciation of the latter is *jiàn*, not *liǎn*. The same author (1958: 498) notes in his *Hanyu Shigao* 《汉语史稿》 that the word *liǎn* appeared later (than *mi ànzi*) after the sixth century. He goes on to say that *liǎn* only referred to the cheeks and was not a synonym for *mi àn*. This meaning of *liǎn* referring to cheeks only lasted till the Tang (618-907AD) and Song Dynasties (960-1279AD). He concludes that it was a long time after this period that *liǎn* replaced the word *mi àn* in spoken Chinese. Wang (ibid.: 566) concludes that "So at that time, a person had two *liǎn*'s, unlike the modern man who has only one *liǎn*."

Hanyu Dacidian 《汉语大词典》 (Luo, 1990) records *liǎn* as having three references: (1) *mi ànjiá* (cheeks), *mi ànbù* (face); (2) *mi ànzi* (self-respect, dignity), with examples all from novels of the more modern periods from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), such as *Outlaws of the Marsh* 《水浒传》 (a novel from the Ming Dynasty), *A Dream of Red Mansions* 《红楼梦》 (a novel from the Qing Dynasty, 1616-1911) and *Deng Ji* 《登记》 (a novel from "New China", i.e. after 1949). The same dictionary records *mi àn* as appearing long before *liǎn* and quotes 墨子 (Mozi)'s (468-376BC) 《非攻》 (*Not to Attack*): 镜于水, 见面之容。(The mirror is better than water. It reflects the face.) According to the dictionary, of the Tang Dynasty (618-907AD), the phrase *mi ànzi* had the metaphorical meaning of 体面 (dignity) and 光彩 (honour). For example: 贼平之后, 方见面子。(After I defeat the enemy, I will have the *mi ànzi* to drink the wine you offer me.) Lu Xun says in his "On Face" of the collection of *Qie Jie Ting Prose* 《且介亭杂文》 that "every kind of identity carries a kind of *mi ànzi*, that is the so-called *liǎn*" (《汉语大字典》, *The Great Dictionary of Chinese Words*, 1988). To summarize:

(1) In ancient Chinese, *mi àn* and *liǎn* are two different notions, the former appearing much earlier and referring to the whole of the face whilst *liǎn* referring to the two cheeks. Thus at that time one person had two different types of face.

(2) Later on, *liǎn* began to replace *mi àn* in spoken Chinese. So, the former was used in more formal situations while the latter was used as a spoken substitute.

(3) In Modern Chinese, one has only one *liǎn*.

Now I will analyze the problem in more detail with additional examples. The modern notion *liǎn* has two basic types of meaning in Chinese:

(1) Literally, it is the front part of the head. In this sense, one can only use *liǎn* now, but not any other word including *mì'ànzi*. For example: *Tā měitiān xǐ liǎngcì liǎn*. 她每天洗两次脸。(She washes her face twice a day.) Here, one can never say *Tā měitiān xǐ liǎngcì mì'ànzi*. 她每天洗两次面子。The counterpart of *liǎn* in this sense in English is “face” (also referring to the front part of the head).

(2) Figuratively, however, the word *liǎn* is totally different. There are many synonyms (about a dozen) of the figurative *liǎn* in Chinese such as *mì'ànzi* 面子, *liǎnmiàn* 脸面, *yánmì'àn* 颜面, *mì'àn* 面目, *liǎnpí* 脸皮, *tǐmiàn* 体面, *qíngmì'àn* 情面, *qíngfēn* 情分, *mì'āner* 面儿, *liǎner* 脸儿 and *rén* 人. These synonyms are interchangeable without any change in meaning, depending on context and collocations. For instance, *Xiandai Hanyu Xiao Cidian* 《现代汉语小词典》 *Compact Dictionary of Modern Chinese*, (1979), one of the popular Chinese dictionaries, says *diūliǎn* 丢脸 (lose face) means *sàngshī tǐmiàn* 丧失体面 (lose dignity). One can also say *diū miànzi* 丢面子 (lose face), or *diūchǒu* 丢丑, or *diūrén* 丢人. A *Chinese-English Dictionary* 《汉英词典》 (1995) lists *liǎnmiàn* 脸面 as a synonym of face, with the example *Kàn wǒde liǎnmiàn, búyào shēng tāde qìle*. 看我的脸面, 不要生他的气了。(For my sake, don't get angry with him.) Here the synonyms of face: *liǎnmiàn* 脸面, *mì'ànzi* 面子, *qíngmì'àn* 情面, etc. are interchangeable in particular situations. The same dictionary defines *yán* 颜 and *yánmì'àn* 颜面 as meaning “face, prestige”, with the example *wúyán jì'ānrén* 无颜见人 (not to have the face to appear in public) and *gùquán yánmì'àn* 顾全颜面 (save face), *yánmiàn sāodì* 颜面扫地 (lose face altogether). However, it also says in Chinese: *méiliǎn jì'ānrén* 没脸见人, *gùquán liǎnmiàn / yàoliǎn / yào mì'ànzi* 顾全脸面 / 要脸 / 要面子 and *chèdǐ diūle rén* 彻底丢了人, respectively. *The New Students Dictionary* 《新编小学生字典》 (Beijing: People's Education Press 1990) defines *liǎn* as meaning *tǐmiàn* 体面 (dignity), and gives an example as *shǎngliǎn* 赏脸 (give face). Yet it is equally idiomatic to say *gěiliǎn* 给脸 or *gěi miànzi* 给面子. For example, 我请他吃饭, 可是他没赏脸 / 没给这个脸/没给这个面子/没给这个面儿. Further examples include *bǎoquán miànzi* 保全面子 (save face), *gù mì'ànzi* 顾面子 (save face), *gùliǎn (miàn)* 顾脸(面) (save face), *yàoliǎn* 要脸 (desire for face), *yào mì'ànzi* 要面子 (desire for face); *liúliǎn* 留脸 (give face), *liú mì'ànzi* 留面子 (give face), *liú qíngmì'àn* 留情面 (give face), etc. All that has been said above points to the fact that the Chinese *liǎn* has many synonyms: *liǎner* 脸儿, *mì'àn* 面, *mì'āner* 面儿, *liǎnmiàn* 脸面, *yán* 颜, *yánmì'àn* 颜面, *tǐmiàn* 体面, *qíngmì'àn* 情面, *rén* 人, etc., including *mì'ànzi*. When they are used to

mean dignity, self-respect, self-image, reputation etc., very often several of these synonyms are interchangeable in particular situations. They are used in the same way and mean the same, without any change in meaning when one is used to replace another.

Tā bùgěi (shǎng) miànzi.

他不给(赏)面子。

Tā bùgěi zhège liǎnmiàn.

他不给这个脸面。

Tā bùgěi zhège liǎner.

他不给这个脸儿。

Tā bùgěi zhège miànér.

他不给这个面儿。

Tā bùgěi (shǎng) liǎn.

他不给(赏)脸。

All the above statements mean the same thing in a particular context. All indicate he didn't give me face, literally. (He did not satisfy the needs of my face.) The following examples all mean “he is not afraid of losing face”, but they use different words for face.

Tā búpà diūliǎn.

他不怕丢脸。

Tā búpà diū miànzi.

他不怕丢面子。

Tā búpà diūrén.

他不怕丢人。

Tā búpà zhāi miànzi.

他不怕摘面子。

Tā búpà zhāi miànér.

他不怕摘面儿。

Tā búpà diū liǎnmiàn.

他不怕丢脸面。

All the above sentences are the same in structure and meaning. They can all be grouped under the same word *liǎn*, but not just *mì'ànzi*, which is only one of the many synonyms of the general modern term *liǎn* in Chinese.

Similarly, the English face has its own synonyms, expressing similar meaning(s), depending on contexts and collocations. From the viewpoint of politeness phenomena, they can also be grouped together under the general cover of face, such as self-esteem, self-respect, self-image, pride, reputation, dignity, prestige, public self-image, grace, reputation, shame, skin, etc. (Wu, 1978: 424).

As face has its synonyms of self-esteem, dignity, etc. in English, so *liǎn* has its synonyms of *yánmì'àn* 颜面, *tǐmiàn* 体面 (dignity), etc. in Chinese. It should now be clear that what Gu, Mao and a few others said about the difference between the English notion of face and the Chinese notion of *liǎn* and *mì'ànzi* does not seem to be justified in this sense. With regard to the study of linguistic politeness, there does not seem to be much difference between the notion of the English face and that of the Chinese *liǎn*, each representing a set of synonyms in its own language.

3. Conclusion

Here I want to stress that, through the above analysis, it is evident that the English definition for face seems similar to that of the Chinese face *liǎn*. There does not seem to be much difference between Chinese face and Western face. *Miànzi* is only one of a dozen synonyms under *liǎn* in Modern Chinese. One cannot equate one with the other. The double notion of Chinese face (*liǎn* and *miànzi*) does not seem to be justified.

Li Yi (2001: 18-21) also finds that Hu (1944: 45, 457), Gu (1992: 13) and Mao (1994: 454)'s Chinese notion of face is problematic. He prefers Brown & Levinson's notion of face to the above researchers' conceptualization of Chinese face (*miànzi*) and argues that:

In contrast to Brown & Levinson's perception of negative face as an individual's need to be free of impositions, *miànzi* identifies a Chinese desire to secure public acknowledgement of one's prestige or reputation. They are two different notions and therefore not really comparable.

Therefore, Li already feels that the Chinese *miànzi* and the English face are not equivalent, but he does not seem to have found the reason. The problem is that this inaccurate conceptualization of the modern Chinese face by the above-mentioned researchers is being quoted more and more not only by researchers of Chinese politeness but also by other researchers such as Watts (2003: 120), Eelen (2001: 9) and Bargiela-Chiappini (2003: 1462). With Leech's investigation results, this research will probably be able to shed some fresh insights into clarifying a few puzzling problems in the studies of Chinese and English face in politeness.

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