

## Face Negotiation in Conflict Resolution in the Chinese Context

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### Abstract

Research on the concept of face and face-work is growing fast, especially in the field of communication, pragmatics, and related fields. Some scholars (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Goffman, 1967; Scollon & Scollon, 1981) attempt to discover the universal theory to account for all human interactions regardless of culture. Other scholars interpret human interactions situated in different cultures, either mechanically applying the model initiated by the scholars mentioned above (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Zhan, 1992), or critically applying the so-called universal theories to the interactions in different cultures (Chang & Holt, 1994; Gu, 1990; Matsumoto, 1988; Scollon & Scollon, 1994, 1995; Jia, 2002). The second line primarily concentrates on the theoretical development and refinement of specific models and mainly deals with the cultural differences, the Chinese concept of face, for example (Hwang, 1998; W. Jia, 1998; Y. Jia, 2002; Scollon & Scollon, 1995). However, no study has been found to deal with the negotiation process and the connection between Chinese face-work and Chinese conflict resolution. This study aims to tentatively analyze face-work, face negotiation in particular in conflict resolution in the Chinese context by micro-interpreting interactions in some episodes of the Chinese tele-play (The Years of Passion and Enthusiasm) and some other daily occasions of interactions.

### Face Negotiation in Conflict Resolution

Negotiation in general is conceptualized as a process in which one is to engage "*in a particular species of communication somehow distinct from generic, everyday interactions*" (Hale, 1984, p.197). However, it might not be wrong to say that "all social encounters involve an element of negotiation. That element is the negotiation of the identities or face" (Hale, 1984, p. 197). Requesting for and giving face inevitably involved in conflict resolution in interpersonal interactions is in particular a negotiation process and when such face negotiation occurs, both direct face act and indirect face act are involved. As the interpersonal relationship in the Chinese context is very complicated, the Chinese face negotiation in resolving conflict can be a very delicate and emotional psychodrama in which, faces are displayed in a variety of verbal and nonverbal behaviors. However, in the Chinese context, face negotiation in resolving conflict almost follows a fixed sequence and pattern.

### Direct Face Act in the Face Negotiation in Conflict Resolution

The direct face act refers to those acts in which requesting for face is explicitly or directly expressed through conventionalized terms of *face*, *lian*, or *mienzi*, etc. in imperatives or obligations. "Give me at least some amount of face, please" is an imperative, while "You should at least give me some amount of face as you have already given to others" is an obligation. Direct face acts are generally used in the negotiation of resolving conflict among

well-acquainted people of equal relationship or on the solidarity ground. Requesting for face in negotiation using direct face act is direct and simple, taking little time and producing positive effect which is generally predictable. The act of requesting for face can be threatening to the face of either of the addresser and the addressee (While the addresser runs the risk of intruding the independence and autonomy of the addressee, he is at the same time facing the danger of being rejected by him or her). It is rare, however, to find that a person could cast aside all consideration of the other's face when directly requested for it. The following conversation may well demonstrate this point.

Situation: Several friends and colleagues are having a specially arranged dinner, drinking spirits and toasting to one another. One of them is the dean of the department where these people work. The dean, though in a bit higher position, is on solidarity terms with his colleagues. One of them, Zhang, proposed a toast to the dean and was refused.

Dean: (when proposed a toast) " *No, no...I can't drink anymore.*"

Zhang: (stand up) " *Well, you have accepted his toast but refused mine. It's not fair.*"

Dean: " *You know, I just cannot help it. I get dizzy when I drink too much. I just cannot stand it.*"

Zhang: " *...At least, you should give me some amount of face.*"

Dean: " *All right, all right...Just a little.*"

The dean could not refuse anymore. Zhang was eventually given some amount of face. Direct face act of this kind has almost become an effective routine in requesting for face, especially among people who share solidarity. In power relationships, however, it is less often used.

### **Indirect Face Act in the Face Negotiation in Conflict Resolution**

The conflict resolution process is a face negotiation process. In this process, indirect face act and nonverbal face acts are preferred in the negotiation when conflict is serious and may have lasted for quite a while. Negotiation in resolving conflict of this kind often undergoes twists of moves involving the interaction of direct and indirect face acts, verbal and nonverbal face acts on both sides. The moves may start with the use of the intermediary face. The following is an excerpt from the tele-play series, the Years of Passion and Enthusiasm. It may well demonstrate the sequence, the strategies of face work, as well as the involvement of indirect face act and nonverbal act in the process of face negotiation for resolving the serious and long years of conflict between husband and wife.

Brief background: The husband and wife in a traditional Chinese family in 1950s to 1970s had been living cat-and-dog life for long years and the situation went from bad to worse: they didn't eat at the same table and they were not even on speaking terms. Divorce seemed to be only a question of time. However, out of the expectation of the audience, dramatic changes took place after a retired commander, an old friend of the couple, had had a talk to both of them. Then, face negotiation for resolving the long years of conflict eventually started with the face work of the intermediary person, whose face is supposed to be bigger than that of either the husband or the wife. The conflict was at last resolved through step-by-step negotiations using in mainly indirect face acts and nonverbal acts.

### **Pre-Conflict Strategy Dealing with Conflict**

Both sides practice forbearance and self-control rather than confrontation.

Move 1: Making use of the intermediary face (through the face work of intermediary person whose face is in general bigger).

Wife: *"You are an old friend of his and you know very well that he is so stubborn that he never admits his fault. Whenever there is a mistake, it is always mine.... You know that he often goes to extremes and would rather choose death than lose face. I have been suffering ever since I was forced to get married with him. I simply can't stand him any longer."*

The Intermediary: (after a long talk) *"...If you have cast aside all considerations of his face, you should at least give me some amount of face...Talk to him for me. You cannot expect a man like him to make concession unless you give him a stage off."* (direct/ locutionary act)

Move 2: Offering and declining a stage-off through indirect face act

It was the husband who ventured to offer a stage-off after the intermediary help. At night, he went upstairs to knock at the door of his wife's bedroom, intending to make amends. However, his wife, rejected his offer of the stage-off.

Husband: (tentatively) *" May I come in and have a talk to you?"* (indirect/ illocutionary act)

Wife: (Lying on bed, pretending to have been sleeping)  
*"I have gone to bed already."* (indirect/ illocutionary act)

Move 3: Creating a favorable face for the other through indirect/illocutionary and nonverbal act.

After rejecting her husband's stage-off, she felt sorry. To compensate for this, she went to the kitchen to cook noodles for her husband the next morning (she has not cooked anything for him for a long time) and then, when her husband was eating in the living room, she came in with her own bowl.

Wife: (watching husband eating noodles, tentatively)  
*"Why don't you eat out today?"* (nonverbal act)  
(indirect /illocutionary act)

Husband: (lifting his head, smiling, yet still uneasy)  
*"Food outside home is not so good."* (nonverbal act)  
(indirect/ illocutionary act)

Move 4: Reinforcing or lauding the face of the other through indirect face act

Husband: (scraping the bowl) *" Is there any more?"* (indirect/illocutionary act and nonverbal act)

Wife: (half kidding) *" No, that's all I've cooked."* (indirect/illocutionary act)

Wife: (Saying nothing, first pour half of the noodles in her bowl into her husband's bowl. Then after a second thought, pour all the remainder in her bowl into her husband's).

(nonverbal act)

Move 5: Resolution of face conflict through true self/face exposed.

Husband: (Divide the noodles in his bowl into two halves and pour a half into her bowl.)

Both husband and wife: (Smiling happily) (nonverbal acts)

## Analysis

The face-work displayed in the negotiation process involved in conflict resolution in the above episode is assumed to formulate in general the patterns of the verbal and nonverbal patterns of behaviors as well as the sequence which the individuals enact in the Chinese in-group horizontal interpersonal relationship between husband and wife, which is expressive rather than instrumental in nature. According to Erving Goffman, face-work is the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face (1967, p. 12). The face work revealed in this episode may be considered to have the on-going nature and may be assumed to be a different variety than might be expected in a hierarchical interpersonal relationship in a similar situation in the Chinese context or similar relationship in a western culture in resolving conflict. The face work and strategies involved in the face negotiation in resolving conflict in this episode may likely embrace the following characteristics.

First, when conflict occurs between husband and wife in a traditional family the first thing one is expected to do is to practice forbearance (*ren*). The practice of forbearance advocated by Confucius is also supported by Taoism and Buddhism which are only second to Confucianism in their influence on the Chinese mind and behavior.

Second, the delicate and expressive face work involved in face negotiation in resolving the conflict is supposed to be not uncommon in horizontal in-group interpersonal relationship, or more specifically, between husband and wife in a traditional Chinese family. Generally speaking, the husband/wife relationship in a traditional family tends to be vertical with husband occupying the dominant position. However, with the dramatic change of the husband's condition (He has retired from the army as a commander and become old and useless, passing time by growing vegetable.) his wife, young and beautiful, has gradually gained an equal footing in the family—she even goes as far as stopping cooking for her husband. It is generally acknowledged that conflict resolution in a vertical in-group interpersonal relationship could not have gone through such twist of negotiation process, as speaking down on the part of superior and speaking up on the part of the subordinate is generally considered to be the norm. Or, if in a modern family, a couple had such serious and long years of conflict to endure, we would not witness such a psychodrama, either. In that case, the couple would choose confrontation. Or they would rather choose divorce to settle conflict once and for all.

Third, the face negotiation or face work in resolving conflict is based on the cooperation of both sides. Or, the eventual resolution of the conflict is based upon sincerity on both sides in improving the relationship and this sincere intention should be realized in the prompt support of the want of or request for face on the other side. Even though the face want or request is often given with reserve or realized step by step.

Fourth, the face work involved in the conflict resolution undergoes virtually a fixed sequence, including the use of the intermediary face: (1) The offer of stage-off on either side; (2) the acceptance of the offer of the stage-off; creating a favorable face for the other while derogating own face, giving face to the stage-off provider; lauding or reinforcing the other's face; and (3) the revealing of the true personal identity under the cover of face, which often marks the final resolution of the conflict. Of course, the process may be interwoven with face declining or rejection on either side of the interactants.

Two points here deserve our attention. First, the intermediary face discussed above is not only instrumental but also often indispensable in resolving conflict. However, the third person's face is in general supposed to be bigger in terms of reputation, prestige, position or age, etc. than that of either of the interactants. Then, to judge whether the complete resolution of the

conflict is reached or not depends, upon to different degrees, the uncovering of the true personal identity of both sides. As seen in the movie teleplay, in the end when the conflict was eventually resolved, both husband and wife no longer put on any face --they just did what their true emotion and desire want them to. Another instance in the same play also proves this point. When the commander was almost on the verge of dying in the hospital, the son of the commander, after long years of conflict with his father, at last came to see him. Then the father made the best use of this stage-off and revealed his heart to his son, to whom he had claimed to have no relationship for years. He shed tears and said, "...Oh, my son, ...You know on the (sur)face, I hated you, but at the bottom of my heart I have always been missing you very badly." The commander at last tore away whatever face he had been projecting toward his son and revealed his true self underneath.

Fifth, to resolve the serious and long years of conflict in the interpersonal relationship between husband and wife, both direct and indirect face acts, or what Austin calls locutionary and illocutionary acts and verbal and nonverbal acts are adopted. And on many occasions, the indirect face act and nonverbal act are more preferable in the face-work and proved to be more effective and persuasive in mending the relationship. The indirect face act in this case are more often than not realized through the question forms of utterances, which are questions in forms, either asked for information or requesting for permission. They, however serve either for the function of requesting for face or giving face. As seen in this episode, "*May I come in and have a talk to you?*" in form is a way of asking for permission, but here in this particular context, its illocutionary force is an offer of a stage-off on the part of the husband and his wife's saying that she was sleeping implies her rejecting of this stage-off. The question on the part of the wife, "*why don't you eat out?*" in fact is not a question for information but implies her intention of returning a stage-off to her husband as well as a compensation for her rejection of her husband's stage-off and at the same time inviting a face from her husband. Her husband's answer, "*Food outside is not so good as the food at home,*" is in fact not a way of answering the question but of lauding of the positive face already given to his wife. And his next question, "*Are there any more noodles?*" is not a question at all but face reinforcement to his wife, which surely does not run the risk of being rejected. It invites a face to himself from his wife. Obviously, his wife's answer, "*No, that's all I've cooked*" (*with a smile*), is in not a negative answer but an illocutionary act of giving a positive face, which is followed by the action of pouring the noodles in her bowl into his.

The illocutionary force in the face negotiation is accompanied and reinforced by nonverbal behavior, such as a bewildered look on the face that accompanies the rejection of the stage-off on the part of the husband, a smile on the husband's face reinforcing the satisfaction for the acquisition of a face, etc. In particular, the action of the husband's scraping of his noodle bowl and the noises he made in doing so vividly demonstrate his intention of lauding the face of his wife rather than merely his hunger for more noodles. Besides, the action of the wife's pouring the noodles of her bowl into the husband's bowl and then, the husband's pouring of the noodles of his bowl into her bowl very well demonstrate the total resolution of the conflict. In this particular circumstance, it is the nonverbal action that speaks louder than words.

Sixth, while accepting the offer of a stage-off or giving face at the beginning stage of the face negotiation, the acceptance and the face giving acts are often accompanied, in different degrees, by face saving or face reserving behavior. Stated differently, requesting for face is always a threatening act to the face of either side in the negotiation process. It may not only threaten the independence and autonomy of the addressee but also the independence and

autonomy of the addresser as s/he may run the risk of being rejected. In this light, both sides are expected to be very cautious and tentative in their requesting for face and face giving acts. When giving face to the other, one would consider saving or reserving some amount of face for oneself. Anyway there is no faceless communication in the world. This is like a bargaining process, both sides should make concessions. This viewpoint is illustrated in this negotiation. When accepting the stage-off offered by the husband, the wife returned a stage off by cooking some *noodles* for him instead of something nicer or *Jiaozhi*, which she usually did on important occasions or for big events. Noodles with which she usually sent off the unexpected visitors from the country here really serve as a face offer to show good intentions since she did not cook for her husband for long. However, such humble meal (rather than something nicer) did reveal that she was making efforts in reserving or saving some amount of face for herself.

In general, negotiation is a natural and inevitable process in conflict resolution. The Chinese perspective of conflict resolution through negotiation may in many ways complement the Western views. The negotiation is a dynamic and interactive process between the participants. It can be regarded as a complicated psychodrama and seems to be unpredictable. However, it may follow almost a fixed pattern and sequence. The process may include, among others, the practice of forbearance before negotiation starts; the use of the intermediary face; the offer of a stage-off, the acceptance or rejection of the stage-off offer; requesting for and giving face, the lauding of the other's face or the reinforcement of the other's face; the eventual revelation of the true self of the interactants, etc. The negotiation in resolving conflict may involve both direct and indirect face acts and verbal and nonverbal face acts and very often it is the indirect and nonverbal face acts that may speak louder.

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