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Shame as an Incomplete Conception  
of Chinese Culture: A Study of Face

Ambrose Yeo-chi King and John T. Myers

**SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTRE**  
**THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY**  
**OF HONG KONG**

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Ambrose Yeo-chi King

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SHAME AS AN INCOMPLETE CONCEPTION  
OF CHINESE CULTURE: A STUDY OF FACE

Ambrose Y.C. King

John T. Myers

INTRODUCTION

It is accepted as virtually axiomatic by Western and Eastern scholars alike that a key principle governing the conduct of Chinese social life is the concept of "face" (Smith 1894, Latourette 1946, Lin 1935, Hu 1944, Hsu 1944, Eberhard 1967, Agassi and Jarvie 1969, Wilson 1970, Stover 1974 to mention only a few). So pervasive has the influence of face been judged that a modern Communist Chinese writer, Yao Wen-yuan accuses his countrymen of "faceism" (Yao 1959, p. 100). Often allied to the discussion of face in that same scholarly literature is the corrolary that its breach occasions personal and, when appropriate, collective reactions of shame (a social reality) rather than guilt (a personal feeling). Social scientists have found the widely assumed invariant relationship between face and shame a handy feature to exercise a penchant for labelling whole cultures in terms of some single characteristic. Thus, one frequently finds Chinese and other oriental cultures labeled as "shame cultures", e.g., the Japanese have been noted as the most outstanding example of this tendency (cf. Benedict 1946). That specific feature then is judged

critical in differentiating oriental cultures from those of the West which are labeled "guilt cultures" (Hsu 1944).

In this paper, the writers neither intend to challenge the important role attributed to face as a key governing principle of Chinese social relations nor to re-analyze in toto crucial points of dissimilarity between oriental and Western cultures. Our fundamental aim, however, is to demonstrate that there are significant deficiencies in the widely accepted view that a face-conscious culture, such as the Chinese, automatically implies the dominance of shame as a means of social control. While the face-shame dyad may at first glance seem firmly rooted in the traditional Confucian emphasis on correct social relations we intend to show that it is in reality an "under-Confucianized" view of Chinese culture. Unlike Eberhard (1967, p. 122) who endeavors to demonstrate that face-shame is the province of the Confucianized upper stratum and that "guilt" is an important component of the cultural tradition of the lower classes completely independent of face considerations, we will attempt to show that the concept of face itself when operative in specific situations applies at least in theory to all Chinese and is in essence directly related to guilt as well as shame. In the final section of this paper we shall consider, albeit briefly, the role of face in contemporary mainland China.

## I. FACE

To the foreigner, the Chinese often appear as an exceedingly, if not an excessively, polite people whose social interaction is acutely tuned to the relative statuses and related attributes of the actors. Concern with the minutiae of interpersonal relations and aversion to situations that may produce open conflict are characteristics of Chinese social interaction that may be viewed positively as a sign of an underlying desire for harmony, or negatively as a sign of inscrutability or even deviousness. Invariably scholars attempting to uncover the logic of Chinese interpersonal relationships have had to grapple with the concept of face and its behavioral implications.

Since the field in which the concept is initially confronted is the social arena, it is understandable that attempts to make sense of it have emphasized those attributes which become visible in such a context. In a basically synthetic definition ably representing accepted wisdom on the topic, the noted sinologist Fairbank (1962, p. 104) avers that face (for the Chinese) has been a social matter by which personal dignity is derived from right conduct and the social approval it has acquired. Loss of face comes from failure to observe the rules of conduct so that others see one at a disadvantage.

Personal worth is not considered innate within each human soul, as in the West, but has to be acquired. Face is thus described in terms reminiscent of Durkheim's "social factors", involving not only the choreography of correct social interaction but also bestowing or withholding personal dignity according to its own dictates. If this is indeed the case then there is no possibility for self-evaluation apart from face itself and the audience that it implies. We hope to show that this contention is of doubtful value.

To date, the most complete and insightful analytic treatment of face has been Hu's seminal study in 1946 in which she closely examines the Chinese terms rendered into English as face. Hu (1944, p. 45) notes that there are two commonly used terms: the first, mien (面), often suffixed with tzu) refers explicitly to possession of prestige deriving from visible "social" success and ostentation; the second, lien (臉) refers to the respect of the group for a man with a good "moral" reputation. The attributional differences between the terms are quite significant; a person may possess one or the other, both, or none. The presence of mien does not in itself entail the presence of lien or vice versa. Mien is predicated on the recognition of a tangible achievement in the sense of high status, political power, high scholarly accomplishment, etc. Lien, on the other

hand, implies a judgement on the man himself and his sincerity in adhering to the rules of correct conduct. It is obvious therefore that one with high mien may not, or need not have lien and vice versa. The former implies a type of positional success, the latter personal moral character. At this point it is already evident that Fairbank's definition above refers only to one form of face, viz. the mien variety.

Although Hu's contention that the dual connotations of the English term face are translated into Chinese by two discrete lexemes may be applicable to the Mandarin speaking regions of North and Central China, it is not applicable in the Cantonese and Hokkien speaking regions of South China where the equivalent of mien is the only term utilized. One finds in the southern dialects mien inserted in situations where the Mandarin speakers would use lien.

1	要不要臉 要唔要面	yao pu yao lien yiu mh yiu mihn	Mandarin Cantonese
2	沒有臉見人 冇面見人	mo yu lien chien jen mouh mihn gin yahn	Mandarin Cantonese
3	厚臉皮 厚面皮	hou lien p'i hauh mihn peih	Mandarin Cantonese
4	丟臉 唔要面	tiu lien mh yiu mihn	Mandarin Cantonese



Agassi and Jarvie (1969, p. 139), in their contention that mien is hardly used in Hong Kong and that lien is the only operative term, seem to have basically misstated the issue. In fact, mien is used quite extensively to denote situations covered in Mandarin by lien as well. Linguists, e.g., Forrest (1951), content that the southern dialects, especially Cantonese, represent a more ancient form of the Chinese language than contemporary Mandarin which is a relative newcomer. It is reasonable to assume that the southern dialects' lack of lien indicates that the term is a comparatively more recent lexical development. A current Chinese dictionary (Tzu-Yuan 辭源, 1947, p. 1230) lists lien as a "popular expression" for mien. While the southern dialects, e.g., Cantonese, Hokkien, do not lexically differentiate the dual meaning of face, they nevertheless allow for those differences to be expressed and understood given the specific context of linguistic occurrence. Since the bulk of the field research carried out for this paper was accomplished in a Cantonese speaking area, i.e., Hong Kong, we shall use only the term mien or its compound mien-tzu to refer to face. The two dimensions of mien may become clearer if we discuss them with reference to the actual interactional situations in which they occur, especially those involving losing face and gaining face, and the causes and domains of each.

A. THE SOCIAL - POSITIONAL MIEN

A key attribute of this form of mien is prestige, in itself a neutral term. It is well known that Chinese traditional society was a carefully graded social system with a clear line of demarcation between those who had started to ascend the ladder of success and those with barely a foot on the bottom rung (Ho, 1962). Prestige was accorded in graded degrees to those situated on various rungs of the ladder. Recognition of this prestige was denoted by the term mien or mien-tzu. Thus such expressions as "to have mien-tzu" and "to have glory on face (mien)" indicated that the individual referred to had achieved a position of honor in the society. While mien was an either-or quantity in the sense that some possessed it and others lacked it, it was also a scalar quantity for those who did possess it. Those firmly rooted on a higher rung of the ladder would have a greater portion than others on a lower rung. Since prestige and mien are difficult to quantify as such, the relative weight was measured in the carefully orchestrated measure of social deference correlated with differentials in social position. Thus the common expression "I have not enough mien-tzu to accomplish the task" indicates that the speaker is both aware of his own possession of mien and also of the relative position that is his.

Mien as a scalar quantity was subject to both decrease and increase. In such a highly structured society those who have begun the upward ascent were sensitive to the nuance of their relationship to those higher or lower on the social scale. Giving accord to the requirements of face was essential to maintaining one's status and prestige. To lose sight of one's mien through inattention to one's relative position in interacting with others was a precarious oversight. If a man of some prestige was requested by his social inferior to mediate for him with government officials or others higher up the social ladder, he would have first assessed his own relative position vis-a-vis the superior and the chances that he may be successful. If he agrees to mediate and is successful, he will have gained face with both parties. If he excuses himself out of recognition that he has "not enough face to do so", he will lose less face with the inferior than if he tried to mediate unsuccessfully. Argument and open contention especially with inferiors is to be avoided. A person who disregards this norm is said "to have no regard for face", either his own or others. Public arguments and disputes are considered the preserve of those who have no mien and therefore nothing to lose, and the person with mien will avoid situations where such contentions are likely to arise. The major exception to this rule is the older

person who has acquired mien both in terms of his accomplishment and his seniority. He may state that "I am too old to worry about losing mien", and in reality he is given more leeway to disregard the prerequisites of face than the younger person. Mien in the social/positional sense, although earned through individual accomplishment, is by no means limited in its extension to the individual achiever. In traditional Chinese society the family and even the village was a primary focus of identity for its members, the accomplishment of individual members reflected prestige on those wider units as well. This extension of mien is attested in such phrases as "try to win face for your father (or ancestors)" and "don't lose face for your village". In the last one hundred years as the nation has become the primary source of identity supplanting the family and village, it is not surprising to hear such Chinese leaders as Chiang Kai-shek speak of the nation's loss of face or national shame. In this instance the loss of face is predicated on the failure of other nations to recognize China's mien.

Mien in the social/positional, scalar sense is akin to a credit card in the West. With good mien just as with good credit one has extensive purchasing power, although with respect to mien the purchases are honor,

influence, and deference rather than tangible commodities as such. Both have their limits. Overextension of credit in the West can result in reduction or loss of purchasing power in the same way as overestimation of one's mien in China can lead to decrease or total loss of prestige and influence.

Social/positional mien acts as a type of externalized sanction with positive and negative dimensions. Internalization of its tenets is not required; what is required is attention to the external details of social life. The details themselves have been spelled out in the Confucian code of correct social behavior which is classified under the rubric of li (禮) - propriety. The early Confucianists have pushed li to such an extreme as to render it a detailed and rigid code concerning clothes, decorum, and numerous trivia of social interaction. Francis Hsu (1944, p. 234) in commenting on the mien-conscious individual notes that he must be attentive to "the appropriate clothes for the appropriate occasion, the suitable manner for the suitable situation, the commonly recognized deference and subordination between superior and inferior", a mistake in any of these matters could threaten him with a loss of mien. Such an attitude almost naturally leads to formalism and ritualism, a consequent referred to by

Hu Shih (1919, p. 285) as Extrinsic Confucianism. Fei Hsiao-tung (1947, p. 88) has dubbed mien-tzu "superficial conformity", a modus vivendi which almost naturally leads to hypocrisy since external conformity is the only requirement.

#### B. MORAL MIEN

The second meaning of mien is that of a moral attribute which corresponds to Hu's use of lien. Hu (1944, p. 45) defines it as "the respect of the group for a man with a good moral reputation: the man who fulfills obligations regardless of the hardship involved, who under all circumstances shows himself a decent human being. It represents the confidence of society in the integrity of ego's moral character, the loss of which makes it impossible for him to function properly within the community ... (it) is... an internalized sanction."

Mien in the moral sense differs quite markedly from social/positional mien on several important points. Unlike its social counterpart it is obtainable by anyone in the society, thus it is at least potentially universalistic in application. It is also not a scalar quantity since it hardly allows for measurable increase or decrease; it is a fixed quantum, acquired or lost as a unit. Another major difference is cited by Hu in the contention that moral face does not necessarily require

the judgement of others to be lost. "There is no necessity for ego to confront public opinion; even though there might be only one person present or none at all, the consciousness of that failure to live up to the dictates of moral mien will be on his mind. This demonstrates the complete internalization of the social sanction".

This moral sense of mien is not a recent addition to Chinese culture. Dr. Hu Shih (1919, p. 285) argues that the social interpretation of li, which we noted above was related to social mien and has been labeled by him as Extrinsic Confucianism, was only one dimension of the Confucianism tradition. It should be recognized that the second or moral dimension of li which Hu Shih labels "Introspective Confucianism" (p. 285) is equally, if not more, important to all great Confucianists such as Mencius and Hsun-tzu. This dimension is directly concerned with matters attendant on man's spirit, his virtues, motives, and the process of self-evaluation. Dr. Schwartz (1959) has rightly observed that the Confucian emphasis on the inner and outer "realms" alike is an example of one of the major polarities of Confucian thought. In the case of li and mien their external or social aspect refers to the outer realm and their internal or moral aspect refers to the inner realm.

The implication should not be drawn, however, that the authors deny the important social contribution to the inner or moral realm since the moral norms themselves are those developed and promulgated by the society; the important point of differentiation is that in one realm the norms referred to need not be internalized while in the other internalization is essential.

Two of the most widely read Confucial classics, The Great Learning and The Doctrine of The Mean, amply testify to the tradition of introspection. In these two classics, cheng ( 誠 ) or sincerity appeared to be a key concept. It is said, cheng is the way of Heaven, cheng is also the way of man." And "the so-called cheng is nothing but to be genuinely honest with oneself". That is to say, one must have sincere motivation. Therefore "a true gentleman must be sincere with himself when he is alone". In other words, a gentleman doesn't need an audience, he should behave even when by himself. Behaving when alone is meant to integrate the inner and the outer realms. This is indeed the highest ideal one can attain. During the Neo-Confucian period of the Sung Dynasty and thereafter the tradition of introspection was expanded and the practice of self-examination, self-discipline, and self-scrutiny advocated (Tang 1967). The process of self-examination, of measuring one's moral



character, is guided by the norms of behavior internalized in the lyon syin ( 良心 ) which may be variously translated as the conscience or superego. Common expressions indicating the practice of this form of moral self-examination are "conscience does not feel at ease" and its positive counterpart "feeling no guilt when scrutinized by conscience". Moral accomplishment or failure and the accompanying possession or lack of moral mien may, though it need not be, known only to the actor himself after the process of self-examination.

Although there are expressions which indicate that lack of moral mien is often an observable phenomenon, e.g., "the skin on his face is thin", our main point is that the audience is not a necessary component. It is obvious therefore that Fairbank's statement quoted earlier that "personal dignity is derived from right conduct and the social approval it acquired" is an oversimplification. If social/positional mien were the only possible source of personal dignity then it would be correct, but moral mien and the tradition of introspective Confucianism indicates that there is another source of such dignity.

II. CHIH ( 恥 ) - SHAME OR GUILT?

Having briefly considered face and its various meanings in Chinese culture we now turn to another concept often identified as the primary means of social control in face conscious oriental cultures - shame. Ruth Benedict (1947) with specific reference to Japan spells out the major defining characteristics of shame and guilt cultures: "True shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not as true guilt do on an internalized commission of sin. Shame is a reaction to other people's criticism. A man is shamed either by being openly ridiculed and rejected or by fantasizing to himself that he has been made ridiculous. In either case it is a potent sanction. But it requires an audience or at least a man's fantasy of an audience. Guilt does not. In a nation whose honor means living up to one's own picture of oneself, a man may suffer from guilt though no man knows of his misdeed and a man's feeling of guilt may actually be relieved by confessing his sin. Hsu succinctly reiterates the same theme in the statement that, "the individual in the...Western cultures...tends to look more to internal forces for guidance of his actions, while the individual in the ... Eastern cultures tends to look more to external circumstances for guidance. This makes the difference between guilt and shame". The

constant note struck in both of the above quotations is that shame cultures emphasize the external, the social judgments of others; and the guilt cultures put more weight on the internal, the personal assessment of one's worth.

Our intent in this section of the paper is to show that the realities of Chinese cultural behavior are much more complex than its facile classification as a shame culture would lead one to believe. A major factor contributing to the problematics of this type of classification may be isolated in the extreme difficulty one often encounters in finding exact English lexemes into which Chinese expressions can be translated. The Chinese term chih, often translated into English as shame, in effect has a possible connotation of guilt. Eberhard (1967, p. 124) warns us, "We can say... the traditional elite of China had an ideology in which shame played an important role, but not in the conventional sense of amoral shame. On the contrary, shame in Confucianism was a moral concept and was internalized, together with the precepts of the code of social behavior. In essence then, shame and guilt operate in the same way". The one aspect of Eberhard's statement that we find open to misinterpretation is his implication that shame was the exclusive possession of the traditional elite. The concept of chih

has long been important in Chinese culture and has ordinarily been expressed as having "a sense of chih". The having "a sense of chih" is esteemed as a virtue and is included as one of the traditional eight constant virtues along with love, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, sincerity, and modesty. Mencius, in a statement indicating that this virtue was viewed as potentially universal in extension and not the exclusive possession of a social elite, insists that "a man without a sense of chih ... is not a man". That same philosopher in the tradition of Introspective Confucianism saw it as the fountainhead of "unlimited self-cultivation" and "self-perfection". The influential classical works, The Great Learning and The Golden Mean testify to the importance of "a sense of chih".

Because it is a virtue, the "sense of chih" is inherently a moral concept; it emphasizes one's awareness of moral norms which should govern conduct and the consequences of failure to act in accordance with them. Although in popular usage it may be appealed to as an admonition for observance of the prerequisite of social/positional face, a more precise usage limits it to the domain of moral face. Social/positional face since it is basically amoral is in no need of moral awareness to guarantee its prerequisites. A "sense of chih" may not

be present in the man with high social/positional face any more than moral mien itself. Moral mien, however, implies the presence of a "sense of chih", in the same way that virtue implies an avoidance of vice. The two concepts differ only in their relative emphasis; moral mien emphasizes the positive dimension of correct moral conduct, and a "sense of chih" emphasizes one's awareness of the consequences of failure to live up to the norms.

A "sense of chih" is likewise a product of the tradition of Introspective Confucianism. The man with a "sense of chih" need not have an audience to follow its dictates. It is this aspect that no doubt caused Eberhard to insist that shame in Chinese culture is not a categorical classification but one with an admixture of guilt, for as the psychologist Erikson (1962, p. 253) defines it, guilt is a "sense of badness to be had all by oneself when nobody watches or when everything is quiet". The concept and possibility of guilt was not peripheral in China, it was constantly nurtured, fostered, and exhorted in the tradition of Introspective Confucianism. In this sense then those who seek to paint a picture of China as an almost exclusively shame conscious culture are guilty of presenting an "under-Confucianized" picture of Chinese culture.

### III. FACE-SHAME IN CONTEMPORARY MAINLAND CHINA

Our treatment of face-shame has to this point more direct relevance for China prior to 1949, contemporary Taiwan, and Hong Kong. What is its position in the new society of Mainland China? We shall offer some preliminary thoughts on the topic recognizing that little actual research explicitly into it has been accomplished.

Since 1949 the Government of Mainland China has carried out systematic attacks on selected traditional features of Chinese culture, especially Confucianism which is regarded as the archaic cultural prerogative of the gentry class. The attacks, however, have not been totally unique to the current government; they actually began in the late Ching Dynasty and gained momentum in the May Fourth Movement of the early Republic. The latter movement has often been called the "New Culture Movement" emphasizing its attempt to reevaluate all traditional ideas.

There are two aspects of the more recent situation which are indeed relatively unique. The first is that it is sponsored and administered by the whole political apparatus of the government and is under the direct control of the ruling party. Secondly, the scope of the attack is so broad that it filters into all segments of society, especially the peasants and the

workers. The intensity of the attack on traditional practices has recently been heightened in the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and the "Criticize Confucius and Lin Piao Campaigns".

The basic intention has been to rebuild Chinese culture and society along lines idealized in the concept of the "New Socialist Man". This "New Socialist Man" is one who works for the masses rather than for personal or family honor; a pertinent characteristic of the "New Ideal Man" is that he has no room for face in his makeup. A.S. Chen (1964) in commenting on contemporary Chinese literature notes: "The portrait of the new citizen naturally leaves no room for saving face. The question of face ... is completely absent...".

It is no accident that one fails to encounter positive treatises on face in the normative literature; Mao Tse-tung in 1947 explicitly stated that he was opposed to "a concern with each other's human feelings and face". Lu Hsun, a Chinese writer, seems to think that the Chinese people's traditional concern with face was carried to excess largely through the influence of the hypocritical upper classes. Yao Wen-yuan (1959, pp. 100-103), a powerful instigator of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, advocates the destruction of face consciousness which to him represents the moral system

of the landlords, capitalists, and their lackies. The new moral ideals should be that of the working class exemplified in the concept of "sincerity".

Lifton (1967) suggests that whereas traditional Chinese culture emphasizes moderation, balance, and harmony, i.e. a "cult of restraint", the contemporary culture stresses spontaneity, conflict, and aggression, a "cult of enthusiasm". He further points out that the primary technique utilized to promote the new ethos is thought reform, a technique which strives at eliciting feelings of guilt rather than shame. The intent is to promote guilt as a primary means of socialization eradicating previous reliance on the face-shame complex.

What aspect of face is actually being attacked? Obviously central focus has been on social/positional face, the scalar quantity, itself a prerogative of success in the traditional society. The moral dimension of face although undifferentiated in the polemics of restructuring Chinese society persists and in fact appear to form the bases for techniques utilized in the restructuring process. The moral dimension is not the unique prerogative of any one culture whether oriental or Western, it corresponds to a fundamental human response to problematic aspects of the life situation. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution the Red Guards



institutionalized the use of "public shame" as a weapon for political socialization and struggle. Solomon (1971, p. 54) reports that the public shaming of a social offender is still much in use among the Chinese today. In this process the question of loss of face as a scalar quantity is not explicitly at issue since in the new society no man is, in theory, to have weightier prestige than another, what is in fact crucial is that the individual be made aware of his failure to meet the moral standards of the society. Whether confessions of guilt that are forthcoming actually meet the requirements spelled out by Erikson is itself a problem since one can easily feign such an attitude to satisfy the requirements of the public forum: successful or not, however, the intent is to produce individuals who are constantly willing to subject their activities to the scrutiny of self-evaluation. What we may indeed be witnessing in mainland China is the demise of the use of the term mien precisely because of its popular overidentification with social/positional prestige, but even though moral mien disappears as a term, the reality to which it has traditionally referred remains as viable as ever. The specific normative content of moral mien may change but the practice of self-examination and group evaluation on moral grounds continue as a viable component of the new socialist society. Indeed it is this strain of the

Confucian tradition, Introspective Confucianism, that is fostered and preserved in a society which continues to attack the tradition which gave birth to it.

#### CONCLUSION

Our intention in this paper has been the modest one of demonstrating that the concepts of face (mien) and shame (chih) have often been interpreted too rigidly by students of Chinese culture. The tendency has been to speak of Chinese culture unidimensionally as a face conscious one in purely the social sense and a shame conscious one on the behavioral level. Our contention has been that such categorical statements reify and conceptually freeze concepts which in Chinese are extremely fluid with a wider domain of application than their English counterparts.

As DeVos (1967) has convincingly argued in the case of Japan, so we have tried to demonstrate that a single dichotomy between the Chinese face-shame complex and the Western sin-guilt one fails to do justice to the complexities of the Chinese understanding of the key terms utilized in posing such a dichotomy. Mien and chih are not merely external sanctions lacking potentiality of internalization; the long tradition of Intrinsic Confucianism testifies not only to the possibility of their being internalized as individual

moral guidelines but insists that internalization is a moral necessity. We have not implied that face-shame in a purely social sense was unimportant in traditional Chinese society, but we claim that in itself it was incomplete; yet, it has been this partial component of the traditional complex that has been emphasized by those who have branded China as a "shame" culture. It reflects in essence an "under-Confucianized view of Chinese culture."

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