

Chinese politeness is not about 'face': Evidence from the business world

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Abstract

Through reviewing the historical development of the English term face and the Chinese terms mianzi and lian, and drawing upon examples of the use of the terms mianzi and lian in the business domain in mainland China and explanations of negotiations in which the author has been personally involved, this paper argues that mianzi and lian (and by reference 'face') are not sub-concepts lying essentially at the heart of Chinese politeness, but separate concepts which, while overlapping with politeness in some instances, frequently operate in ways which are entirely removed from any accepted notions of politeness. In this way, this paper claims that concern for mianzi and lian in Chinese business interaction is just as likely to engender acts of impoliteness as it is to link with examples of politeness, and concludes that the sooner we accept the disassociation between Chinese 'face' and politeness, the more we will find ourselves better placed to understand crucial nuances of cross-cultural interaction between Chinese and non-Chinese interactants.

Keywords: face, politeness, lian, mianzi, Chinese

1. Introduction

For at least the past three decades, linguists, pragmatists, sociologists, diplomats and business people have, either through their invariably thorough research efforts or through their tacit acceptance of the putative status of knowledge, posited a direct and inextricable relationship between Chinese politeness and the concept of 'face'. The purpose of this paper is not to upset or offend those who have adopted, and in many cases continue to advocate, such a relationship, but rather this paper aims to establish that the concepts of 'face' in Chinese, *mianzi* and *lian*, do not necessarily underpin Chinese politeness, especially in the business context.

1.1. Scope

The title of this paper is potentially misleading in at least two respects. Firstly, it should more properly read “Chinese politeness is not about *mianzi* or *lian*”, for it is only due to reasons of convenience, academic custom and the historical vapour trails associated with politeness theory that I use the English term ‘face’ (in its figurative sense) in place of its Chinese predecessors, *mianzi* and *lian*. Secondly, although this paper provides a brief high-level summary of politeness concepts in Chinese (such as *limao* and *keqi*), it does not present an in-depth analysis of what is or is not Chinese ‘politeness’. Rather, this paper attempts – by focusing on Chinese socio-linguistic examples – to show that claims that ‘face’ is the keystone of Chinese politeness are flawed. Indeed, the paper questions whether ‘face’ is an apposite linguistic tool for examining the inner workings of politeness in Chinese culture.

The paper begins by reviewing the historical development of the figurative use of the English term ‘face’ and the Chinese terms *mianzi* and *lian*. The paper then draws upon examples of the use of the terms *mianzi* and *lian* in the business domain in mainland China and explanations of negotiations in which I have been personally involved to argue that *mianzi* and *lian* (and by reference ‘face’) are not sub-concepts lying at the heart of Chinese politeness, but separate concepts which, while overlapping with politeness in some instances, frequently operate in ways which are entirely removed from any accepted notions of politeness.

1.2. Status of concepts

Much has been written about the elucidating effect of, on the one hand, distinguishing between first-order and second-order pragmatic concepts such as ‘politeness’ and ‘face’ (see, for example, Watts et al. 1992: 3–4; Haugh and Hinze 2003: 1582; Yu 2003: 1686; Haugh 2009: 5) and of, on the other hand, clarifying the distinction between *emic* (or ‘culture-specific’) and *etic* (or ‘universal’) notions of ‘face’ and ‘politeness’ (see, for example, Haugh and Hinze 2003; Hinze 2005: 172–173; Ruhi and Işık-Güler 2007: 684; Ruhi 2010). First-order concepts equate with folk or emic notions of the particular concept and hence indicate how members of a particular socio-cultural group perceive and talk about the concept. Second-order concepts pertain to theoretical constructs which are used as tools by researchers to explain particular concepts. Haugh (2009: 5) warns that while the first-order/second-order dichotomy is helpful, it is also important to consider *participant* perspectives (as opposed to solely *analyst* perspectives) of concepts such as ‘face’ and ‘politeness’.

This paper examines first-order emic perspectives of *mianzi* and *lian* (and, to a lesser extent, first-order emic perspectives of Chinese 'politeness'). It attempts to do this by considering several metapragmatic in-vokings of the terms in Chinese business interaction. The basic premise underlying this approach is a concern that an expanding divide between first-order emic usages of *mianzi*, *lian* and 'face' and their second-order manifestations runs the risk of undermining the rationale of much research into such concepts, which is largely to understand crucial nuances of cross-cultural interaction between Chinese and non-Chinese interactants.

2. Methodology

2.1. Epistemology

As is the case with any pursuit of knowledge, there is a need to understand the type of knowledge that we are pursuing. There is a proposition that the meaning of something does not reside in any outside, objective, or independent reality; rather meanings are created out of our communicative practices (Gergen 1982; Penman 1988, 1994). Wittgenstein's philosophies in this regard are important. His lengthy explorations in *Tractatus*, of the relationship between language and the world, led him to conclude that such a relationship was ineffable because of the very nature of language (Janik and Toulmin 1973, cited in Penman 1994: 18). Many of the ideas expressed by Wittgenstein in regard to language have shaped the research process which has led to this paper. Although this paper does not hold absolutely that the meaning of a word is "its use in the language" (indeed, there is much evidence to suggest that Wittgenstein did not posit this view unrestrainedly)¹, there is no doubt that the meaning of a word is related to its use; in fact it can be argued that the meaning of a word is the main determinant of its use (Goddard 1998: 6). Consequently, much of my data has been gathered with a view to eliciting knowledge about the ways in which terms such as *mianzi*, *lian* and 'face' are used in language (or how these concepts are formed in our communicative process) as well as information on what people know about the uses of these terms (see Hinze 2005).

2.2. Data

This paper intends to provide an ethnographically-grounded treatment of terms such as *mianzi*, *lian* and 'face'. I have adopted three methods of data collection in this study. Firstly, I gathered a number of instances

of the figurative use of *mianzi* and *lian* (and related terms) from written and non-written materials (such as short stories, newspapers, magazines, posters, television, cinema and music)². Secondly, since commencing work in Shanghai in the fields investment banking and law, I have collected actual instances of the use of *mianzi* and *lian* from business interaction involving Chinese participants in China³. Finally, in an attempt to demonstrate that my interpretation of the first-order emic perspectives of *mianzi* and *lian* is consistent with that of the participants in the relevant interaction, I carried out post-interaction discussions about the relevant interaction with certain native-speaker participants in the interaction⁴.

3. Brief summary of politeness in Chinese

In arguing that *mianzi* and *lian* do not necessarily underpin Chinese politeness, we need to first consider how ‘politeness’ is understood in the context of this paper. ‘Politeness’ in Chinese is most often rendered as *keqi* or *limao*. Somewhat loosely, *keqi* is usually associated with polite speech and *limao* is usually associated with polite behaviour⁵.

On *keqi*, Gao (2006: 11) explains, “the notion of other is prominent in *keqi*. Respecting others, tolerating others, treating others equally, understanding others, not revealing others’ weaknesses, giving *mianzi* to others, saving *mianzi* for others, amicable to others, polite to others, showing warmth in receiving others, and showing *renqing* (人情 ‘human feeling’) all define *keqi*. *Keqi* also denotes a harmonious and easy-going atmosphere.”

Gu (1990: 238) points out that “*limao* is the most approximate Chinese equivalent to the English word politeness”. He further explains that “there are basically four notions underlying the Chinese conception of *limao*: respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth and refinement” (Gu 1990: 239).

The concepts of *keqi* and *limao* and their emic characteristics are deserving of a much more detailed analysis than the scope of this paper permits. Nonetheless, it is important to note here that, to borrow an expression from the world of mathematics, there is not always a positive correlation between *mianzi* and *lian* and manifesting *keqi* (*keqi de ciyu* 客气的词语) and *limao* (*you limao de xingwei* 有礼貌的行为). This point is discussed further in section 5 below.

4. Historical development of ‘face’, *mianzi* and *lian*

4.1. The origins of ‘face’ in English

In order to establish the premise that *mianzi* and *lian* do not underlie Chinese politeness, it is useful to consider the etymological journey

that 'face', *mianzi* and *lian* have travelled to reach the point where they are postulated to be core concepts when describing Chinese politeness. The Chinese origin of the figurative use of 'face' in English is now well-documented (see, for example, Mao 1994; Ervin-Tripp et al. 1995: 46–47; Kipnis 1995; Haugh and Hinze 2003; Yu 2003). It is understood that the figurative use of 'face' was borrowed into English from Chinese during the late 19th century from portrayals of "Chinese national character" by Western missionaries and diplomats who were stationed in China at the time (Kipnis 1995; Kornacki 1995; Haugh and Hinze 2003).

It is also understood that the concept of 'face' was introduced into academic English discourse by Goffman (1955, 1959, 1967) and that 'face' came to take its place as a central pillar of politeness theory through the influential work of Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) (Haugh 2009: 1). Goffman's theories on 'face' and 'facework' seem to have been inspired by the early English-language works on 'face' and Chinese national character (Goffman 1959: 24, 53, 82, 89, 244; Goffman 1967: 15, 17, 29, 82; Haugh and Hinze 2003).

Almost invariably, the works that Goffman referred to in developing his theories on 'face' and 'facework' (see, for example, Smith 1894; Douglas 1895; Holcombe 1895; Macgowan 1908) rendered 'face' as a 'false social appearance' (see Kipnis 1995: 123). However, none of these early works on 'face' in English specified which Chinese word (or words) they were actually discussing. Consequently, while it is well-established that the figurative use of 'face' was inspired by Chinese language and culture, it is less certain which Chinese words were the source of the English loanwords. Also, many of the early Western discussions on 'face' have to be addressed with some caution. As Kipnis (1995: 120) warns, "the ease with which Orientalists twisted the meanings of their borrowed terms not only illustrates the ambiguity inherent in all translations, but also reflects the power disparities of the period".

4.2. The Chinese origins of 'face'

In order to deduce what Chinese words the early writers on 'face' in English were referring to, it is helpful to examine evidence of contemporaneous works in Chinese that addressed the possible collection of words and concepts discussed by Smith (1894), Holcombe (1895) and Macgowan (1908). It appears that the Chinese contemporaries of Smith, Holcombe and Macgowan did not share the Westerners' fascination with what they called 'face'. It was not until later that Chinese researchers began to discuss the Chinese words and concepts that gave rise to the Western discussions of 'face'. Indeed, most studies in this

modest collection of works were themselves inspired by the observations of Smith and Macgowan. Between 1919 and 1937, Chinese scholars were largely influenced by the forces of the May Fourth Movement (*Wusi yundong*). A key focus of scholarly concern during this period was “Chinese national character”. Novelist, Lu Xun, was the main protagonist. Many of his articles and novels focused on what he saw as the ugly aspects of Chinese character. Lu’s *Mashang zhi riji* (*Instant diary*) (1960a [1926]) and *Shuo mianzi* (*On ‘face’*) (1960b [1934]) pinpoint *mianzi* as the most complex and potent key to understanding Chinese national character and national spirit (cf. Zhai 1994: 10). In his *The true story of Ah Q* (1960a), Lu Xun ridiculed the Chinese people’s obsession with *mianzi*. However, perhaps the most thorough and informative work of this era – in terms of attempting to understand which Chinese word or words Smith, Holcombe and Macgowan were discussing when they spoke of ‘face’ – is Guangdan Pan’s (1995 [1937]) monograph *Minzu texing yu minzu weisheng* (*National characteristics and national hygiene*). In Pan’s opinion, Smith’s (1894) ‘face’ was a translation of Chinese words such as *lianpi*, *lianmian*, *lian* and *miankong*⁶. Pan’s treatment of expressions such as 爱脸皮 *ai lianpi* (‘the love of face’), 很有面孔 *hen you miankong* (‘to have a lot of face’), 没有面孔 *meiyou miangkong* (‘to have no face’), 伤脸 *shang lian* (‘to injure face’), *shang lian* 赏脸 *shang lian* (‘to award face’), 丢脸 *diu lian* (‘to lose face’), 保全面孔 *baoquan miankong* (‘to save face’), 保全脸面 *baoquan lianmian* (‘to save face’), and 不要脸面 *bu yao lianmian* (‘to not want face’) suggests that this complex array of Chinese words, expressions and concepts refers to something far more multifarious than simply the ‘false social appearance’ referred to by the early Western writers on ‘face’ (see, as briefly discussed above, Smith 1894; Douglas 1895; Holcombe 1895; Macgowan 1908).

Goffman also drew on the works of Hu (1944) and Yang (1945) for inspiration for his theories. Hu’s (1944) work truly deserves to be described as seminal for at least two reasons. Firstly, Hu’s paper inspired much of the academic discourse on ‘face’ that has developed over the past seven decades. Secondly, Hu was the first researcher to make a cogent connection between the English word ‘face’ and the Chinese words and expressions that gave rise to the figurative use of the word in English. Hu distinguished what she referred to as the two words for ‘face’: *lian* and *mianzi*. Briefly, Hu argued that a Chinese context provides for two forms of what has been labelled as ‘face’ in English; one concerned with moral character (*lian*) and the other concerned with reputation achieved through success, ostentation and “getting on in life” (*mianzi*) (Hu 1944: 45). According to Hu, *lian* and *mianzi* are multifaceted concepts that can be lost, gained, embellished, given, left,

borrowed, wanted, not wanted, shared, considered, ignored, thick and thin, among other expressions. *Lian* represents the relationship of a person's actions and character to the confidence of society in the person's integrity and moral character (Hu 1944: 45). *Mianzi* refers to the extra prestige or status that is held by individuals by virtue of their exceptional actions, networks, positions, accomplishments, etc. (Hu 1944: 45). Although Hu's *mianzi/lian* dichotomy continues to be the source of much consideration among contemporary researchers (see Hinze 2002; Hinze 2005; Gao 2006), her careful investigation into *mianzi* and *lian* (and related terms) revealed the complexity of these concepts and established that Chinese words such as *mianzi* and *lian* cannot be reduced simplistically to the meaning of 'false social appearance'.

Yang's (1945) study of Chinese village life devotes some attention to the factors involved in what constitutes a loss or gain of 'face' (Yang 1945: 167–172). He outlines seven factors that influence the loss or gain of 'face' in the context of a Chinese village: equality of status or position; inequality of social status; the presence of a witness; social relationships; social value or social sanction; consciousness of one's own social prestige; and age. Although Yang makes it explicit that 'face' is a literal translation of the Chinese characters *lian* and *mian*, he does not explain to the reader the contexts in which these two Chinese words are applied. He uses the terms 'face' throughout his discussion and hence leaves the reader with the impression that he equates the concepts with the concept of 'face' in English, so while Yang's brief account of 'face' is highly informative, it does not enunciate the relationship between Chinese concepts such as *mianzi* and *lian* (and related terms) and 'face' in English.

The point here is that in developing his theories on 'face' and 'face-work' and in defining 'face' as the "positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman 1967: 5), Goffman borrowed heavily from the works of Macgowan (1908), Smith (1894), Holcombe (1895), Hu (1944) and Yang (1945) without considering the 'emic' aspects of, or drawing a precise connection between, 'face' and the Chinese terms that engendered the figurative use of this term in English. When Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) inherited Goffman's insights and further extended the concept of 'face' to explaining politeness phenomena in all human societies, this began a process that has largely resulted in the term 'face' being used as a key analytic tool for understanding politeness behaviour in Chinese culture (and also in other cultures). For instance, in respect of *mianzi* and *lian*, Yu (2003: 1700; citing Mao 1994: 463) states, "Basically, to be polite in Chinese spoken interactions is to

know how to pay attention to each other's *mianzi* and *lian*, and 'to enact speech acts appropriate to and worthy of such an image'".

Subsequently, it has become apparent that, because of significant disparities between how 'face' (and emic renderings of the metaphor such as *mianzi* and *lian*) is used in everyday speech and how it is used in academic discourse (see Haugh and Hinze 2003) and because of the inability of academic renderings of 'face' to capture culture-specific aspects of 'face' and its local equivalents in specific languages and cultures (see Strecker 1993: 121), the term 'face' is an inadequate mould in which to cast universal theories of human behaviour (Haugh and Hinze 2003). In respect of Chinese politeness behaviour in particular, there are significant weaknesses associated with claims that *mianzi* and *lian* can be used to explain politeness, especially in the business context. In my research, I have encountered at least 45 different Chinese language expressions involving *mianzi* and *lian* (and related concepts) (see Hinze 2002). Instances where these are used in the business context are rarely associated with behaviour that could be considered (either in a first-order or second-order sense) to be polite. Let us now turn to a brief analysis of several examples of the operation of *mianzi* and *lian* in the Chinese business context.

5. *Mianzi* and *lian* in the Chinese business context

5.1. Background

The first sense that I had that neither *mianzi* nor *lian* underlie Chinese politeness came when I was gathering data for my PhD. thesis in Beijing in 1999 and 2000. I surveyed 130 students of business and law at the People's University in Beijing. I prepared 3 questionnaires and I intended to support my survey data with interviews of the respondents (see Hinze 2002: 14–17). However, only 10 out of the 130 students were willing to participate in the interviews. The overwhelming majority of students stated that their reason for refusing to be interviewed was that they did not consider *mianzi* or *lian* to be a topic worthy of discussion; that the topic is really only something for self-conscious people, unscrupulous business people or politicians to consider⁷. Interestingly, the survey data were not entirely consistent with such a view, but from that time I began to suspect that something which is treated with so much suspicion by some of China's leading students cannot be invariably fundamental to politeness behaviour in China.

In the years since then, I have gathered dozens of examples of the use of the terms *mianzi* and *lian* (and related terms) in the business domain in mainland China and I have often sought explanations from

participants in the situations in which these examples have arisen. I discuss five such examples below and I argue that *mianzi* and *lian* (and by reference 'face') are not sub-concepts lying essentially at the heart of Chinese politeness, but separate concepts which, while overlapping with politeness in some instances, frequently operate in ways which are entirely removed from any accepted notions of politeness.

The examples discussed below form a part of the growing corpus of evidence suggesting that the blending of analyses of 'face' and politeness has resulted in limitations on our understanding of each of the concepts themselves and has overlooked the fundamental distinctions between them (see further, Chang and Haugh [in press] and Kong [2003]). The examples were chosen for their typicality (most of the five examples largely mirror several other examples of the use of *mianzi* and *lian* in business that I have gathered) and because they provide clear instances of the distinction between *mianzi/lian*, on the one hand, and Chinese politeness, on the other hand. The examples are aimed at showing that there is often not a positive correlation or an inextricable link between being polite and engaging in the management of *mianzi/lian*. Indeed, in the Chinese business context, participants in an interaction frequently engage in non-polite or even impolite verbal or non-verbal behaviour and at the same time, for instance, 'give face' (*gei mianzi* 给面子) to other participants in the interaction. Equally, in the Chinese business context, it is quite common for participants in an interaction to engage in polite verbal or non-verbal behaviour in a manner that does not 'give face' (*gei mianzi* 给面子) or 'consider face' (*gu mianzi* 顾面子) to or for other participants in the interaction⁸.

5.2. Examples

- (1) “你就必须满足最后的期限。我们不能接受任何延误。你们所是我们管理合伙人推荐给我们客户的。这是面子问题。”

'You simply must meet the deadline. We cannot accept any delays. Your firm was recommended to our client by our managing partner. This is a matter of *mianzi*!'

In this example, my colleague was firmly stating to a lawyer at a Chinese law firm that any failure to meet the required deadline on a litigation matter would not be acceptable (the lawyer from the Chinese law firm had called to explain that he may not be able to meet the deadline). Here, *mianzi* refers to the image of our law firm and its managing partner in the eyes of our client. It is being used to implore that a certain standard is met in order to avoid looking bad in the eyes of the

client. It did not, in this instance, engender polite behaviour or polite speech acts. Indeed, the conversation did not include on the part of either participant any of the standard signposts of politeness, such as hedging or apologies. It was a frank and straightforward demand that a certain standard be met in order to protect the image of the firm and its managing partner. There is very little, if any, scope for evaluating such a demand as being impolite (*meiyou limao* 没有礼貌) but it is clear that such a demand was not considered by the recipients to be polite (in the sense of *you limao* 有礼貌 or *hen keqi* 很客气).

- (2) “我们将坚持说，是她自己同意辞职。一方面，我们需给她个台阶下，我们应当给她面子，但另一方面，我们也必须避免给人留下这样的印象，即她的行为在本公司是可以得到容忍的。”

‘We will insist that she agreed to resign. On the one hand we need to give her stairs to leave the stage – we should allow her to save *mianzi* (literally, ‘we should give her *mianzi*’), and on the other hand we must try to avoid the impression that such behaviour is achievable at this company.’

In example (2), an employee of our client had engaged in a number of instances of serious misconduct, which provided our client with grounds to terminate her employment. However, the client insisted that the employee exit the company by way of resignation. *Mianzi* here refers to the image of the employee in the eyes of others (especially her co-workers, family and friends). The concern for *mianzi* did not engender polite behaviour (linguistic or otherwise). Traditionally, politeness theorists have tended to explain such examples by way of linking them to, for instance, ‘face-saving’ politeness strategies. However, this highlights the divide between theoretical constructs and the pre-theoretical concepts on which they are based. In this instance, the client did not engage in any language or non-language behaviour that could be evaluated by the participants in the interaction or anyone connected with the interaction as polite (*you limao* 有礼貌 or *hen keqi* 很客气), and yet it was clear that the situation involved the ‘giving of *mianzi*’ to the employee. Politeness, in the pre-theoretical sense, did not play a role in the interaction and yet *mianzi* was at the core of the interaction. Indeed, the exchanges between the employee and our client were tense and devoid of the usual language behaviours associated with being polite (in the sense of *you limao* 有礼貌 or *hen keqi* 很客气).

- (3) “昨天我没有提及这些事情的唯一理由是我希望给 Alan 面子。我只是考虑他的面子。今天 Alan 不在这里，所以现在我能说这些事情。”

Alan 是我们现在有这些麻烦的根源。我完全不能忍受 Alan。他完全不能让人忍受。”

“The only reason why I didn't mention these points yesterday was because I wanted to give Alan *mianzi*, I was considering his *mianzi*. Alan is not here today, so now I can say these things ... Alan is the reason why we are having these problems. I simply cannot stand Alan. He is intolerable!”

In this example, representatives of my firm's client were involved in negotiations aimed at resolving a serious shareholders' dispute. The representative of the Chinese shareholder uttered the above statement on the second day of negotiations, largely in an effort to explain why he did not respond to the questions of our client on the previous day. He indicated that the reason why he did not answer the questions on the previous day was because he did not want to offend one of the representatives of our client (who was present on the first day but absent on the second day). Essentially, he was using concern for this person's (whose real name is not Alan) *mianzi* as a way of further avoiding the questions while at the same time delivering a strong attack on Alan and accusing Alan of being solely responsible for the dispute. Here, again *mianzi* refers to Alan's image in the eyes of others (especially his fellow senior colleagues and legal advisors). The Chinese interactant's reference to concern for Alan's *mianzi* is used as a pretense for delivering a serious criticism of Alan (which the Chinese interactant had also expressed on a previous occasion). The Chinese interactant was invoking the concept of *mianzi* to account for his behaviour. He was asking the addressee (my firm's client and Alan's colleague) to interpret his behaviour as politeness (in the sense of *you limao* 有礼貌 or *hen keqi* 很客气). Even in the theoretical sense, one could explain that the speaker was engaging in a 'face-saving' politeness strategy by going off-record. However, this was done in the full knowledge that his utterance would have the effect of attacking Alan's *mianzi* and, accordingly, his utterance was aimed at not giving any *mianzi* to Alan. In this way, the Chinese interactant was able to engage in polite behaviour that had a negative impact on Alan's *mianzi*.

- (4) “你难道不理解吗？这无关荣誉，而只是脸面问题。谢先生是想要面子。他的朋友最近在生意上宰了日本人，所以如果谢先生不能对你做同样的事情，他就没了面子。”

“Don't you understand? This is not about honour, it's about *lian-mian*. Mr Xie wants *mianzi*. His friends recently ripped off the

Japanese in their investment, so if Mr Xie is not able to do the same to you, he will lose *mianzi*.”

In example (4), our client had been informed only minutes from closing of an asset acquisition that the inventory being acquired had diminished in value by almost 90%. Our client had refused to include a price adjustment mechanism in the deal because this had previously been a sensitive issue in negotiations with the Chinese party, so our client insisted that it was a matter of taking the Chinese party’s word that the value of the inventory would be maintained between signing and closing. Upon being told about the loss of value in the inventory, our client shouted at the Chinese party, saying “Where is your sense of honour!” The Chinese party walked out of the room and the company’s newly appointed accountant made the above utterance to our client. Here, *mianzillianmian* is about the Chinese party’s image in the eyes of his friends (also private entrepreneurs in the local community). The concern for *mianzi* had nothing to do with politeness in this instance and indeed gave rise to the Chinese party going back on their promise not to let the inventory lose value.

(5) “不，我们不准做出任何让步。他们在规格上撒谎。如果他们自己不要脸，那我们就不用给他们留脸面。”

“No. We are not going to offer any concessions. They are lying about the specifications – if they don’t want *lian*, we should not give them *lianmian*.”

In this example, our client had explained to the Chinese party that they wanted to make changes to the specifications in a construction and supply contract. Our client stated that the specifications were previously discussed only between the Chinese party and our client’s technical personnel – not our client’s commercial personnel. The Chinese party insisted that the specifications had already been agreed between the parties and they were not willing to adjust the specifications unless there was a commensurate adjustment in the price. The senior Chinese negotiator said the above statement to his junior colleague when his junior colleague suggested that the parties should compromise on certain other items in order to reach agreement on the specifications and the price. Here, *lian* is about the image of our client in the eyes of the Chinese counterparty. The Chinese counterparty was being critical of our client’s apparent back flip in regard to the specifications and the expression “不要脸” implies that our client was being dishonourable and therefore was not worthy of being given any *lianmian* in the form

of concessions on outstanding items in the negotiation. This statement was uttered in anger and frustration. It was a strong criticism of our client, expressed indirectly by one representative of the Chinese counterparty to another. *Lian* and *lianmian* in this instance did not speak of politeness. Indeed, there was very little scope in this instance for contemplating that concern for *lian* and *lianmian* would engender polite behaviour in the context.

6. Conclusion

Mianzi and *lian* (and related Chinese concepts) are multifaceted concepts and previous research has provided examples of how concern for *mianzi* and *lian* gives rise to polite behaviour in Chinese interaction (see Gao 2006; Gu 1990; Yu 2003). Behaviours associated with managing one's own and/or other's *mianzi* and *lian* do indeed sometimes underlie polite behaviour in China, but it is not the case that concern for *mianzi* and *lian* is the central motivation for politeness in China. It is true that, in the Chinese interactional context, if one is not polite to others, one is usually not, for instance, 'giving face' (*gei mianzi* 给面子) to others. Yet, it is frequently true that, for example, one can be polite to others, while not 'giving face' (*gei mianzi* 给面子) to others. In Chinese business interaction, concern for *mianzi* and *lian* frequently has very little – if anything – to do with politeness and often engenders acts of impoliteness, and acts of politeness often result in a negative impact on one or more interactants' *mianzi* and/or *lian*. This indicates that there is a need to (i) develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between Chinese concepts such as *mianzi*, *lian*, *renqing* (人情 'human feeling'), *keqi* (客气, 'politeness') and *limao* (礼貌, 'politeness')⁹ and (ii) reconsider the application of terms such as 'face', *mianzi* and *lian* as key analytical tools for postulating theories on Chinese politeness. This paper has attempted to show that terms such as *mianzi* and *lian* (and, thus, 'face' as theorized by Goffman and later Brown and Levinson and others) are clearly not suitable starting points for theorizing politeness. Indeed, it is likely that a stronger understanding of the disassociation between *mianzi*, *lian*, 'face', and politeness will allow us to better understand crucial nuances of cross-cultural interaction between Chinese and non-Chinese interactants.

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Bionotes

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Notes

1. See Hunter (1986) for a critical analysis of Wittgenstein's ideas on meaning and use. See also Kenny (1994); Lugg (2000); Rundle (2001).
2. More precisely, I collected 54 instances of the figurative use of these terms in ten contemporary Wang Shuo short stories (see Hinze 2002: 8–9) and more than 50 instances of these terms from newspapers, magazines, posters, television, cinema and music (see Hinze 2002: 11–12).
3. I have been living and working (in the fields of investment banking and law) in China since 2004. In my career as a lawyer in China, I have encountered several dozen examples of the use of *mianzi* and *lian* in business interaction. Some of these instances have been recorded on tape and video during confidential client meetings, but most have only been recorded in written meeting notes.
4. In most cases, these instances have been recorded in written meeting notes, and I have then conducted post-meeting discussions with my native-speaker colleagues (who, in most instances, were also present during the meeting) to understand their interpretation of the particular instances. These post-meeting discussions have also been recorded in written meeting notes.
5. This basic rule does not always apply and *keqi*, for example, can be manifested by non-verbal behaviours such as body language. See Gao (2006: 11–12) for a more detailed explanation of *keqi*.
6. It is interesting to note that Pan uses the term 面孔 *miankong* quite often throughout his treatise. It seems that such a usage of this term is particular to the Wu dialect at the time. I found no evidence to suggest that this usage of the term has been incorporated in Modern Standard Chinese.
7. This does not mean, necessarily, that *mianzi* and *lian* cannot therefore underlie politeness. It may mean that the respondents took these concepts for granted and so there is nothing to talk about, and/or that if people do bring them to consciousness it is so that they can manipulate others with them. Nonetheless, it sparked a

- curiosity in me that the relationship between *mianzi/lian* and politeness may not be as robust as many theorists propose.
8. Example 3 below is indicative of this point. However, many examples of this point do not invoke the use of *mianzi* or *lian* in the interaction. For instance, in the Chinese business context, it is not uncommon for subordinates to politely decline invitations from superiors to work-related events organized by the superiors. Such instances are frequently evaluated as not 'giving face' (*gei mianzi* 给面子) to one's superior, even though they are almost invariably instances of polite conduct.
 9. For instance, Spencer-Oatey (2009) argues that the relationship between 'face' and 'politeness' is heavily impacted by situational phenomena. More research needs to be done into whether, among other things, the disconnection between *mianzi/lian* and politeness occurs more frequently in business interaction where the nature and role of interactional goals are likely to differ vis-à-vis the situation with non-business interactions.

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