

A Comparative Analysis of Mianzi and Facework Strategies Among Chinese and Western European University Students

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Abstract: This study investigates the divergent approaches to “face” and “facework” between Chinese and Western European university students, aiming to provide a multi-layered explanation for observed behavioral differences in face-threatening situations. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research analyzes quantitative survey data from 15 scenario-based questions administered to both cultural cohorts and interprets these findings through a qualitative synthesis of established theoretical frameworks. The results reveal a consistent pattern: Chinese students predominantly favor harmony-oriented, indirect, and other-focused facework strategies, while their Western European counterparts gravitate toward direct, assertive, and self-focused strategies. The primary contribution of this paper is the development of a comprehensive explanatory model that moves beyond a singular theoretical lens. By integrating Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, Ting-Toomey’s Face-Negotiation Theory, and the foundational philosophical traditions of Confucianism and the European Enlightenment, this study argues that these divergent communication styles are not arbitrary but are predictable outcomes of deeply rooted cultural value systems. The findings underscore the enduring resilience of cultural norms in an era of globalization and highlight the critical need for nuanced intercultural competence in international higher education and beyond.

Keywords: “mianzi” culture; Hofstede’s cultural latitude theory; cross-cultural communication; social hierarchy; individualism

1. Introduction: The Enduring Salience of ‘Face’ in Intercultural Communication

In an era of unprecedented globalization, the need for effective intercultural communication is particularly acute in international student mobility and globally integrated workplaces [1]. While technology fosters a more interconnected world, deep-seated cultural norms continue to shape social interaction and create potential for misunderstanding (Gao, 1998). Central to these interactions is the concept of “face,” a universal term for the public self-image that individuals strive to maintain and negotiate [2]. However, the meaning of face and the communicative behaviors, or “facework,” used to manage it vary profoundly across cultures [3].

This study addresses a gap in the literature by moving beyond broad value comparisons. While many studies have utilized frameworks like Hofstede’s dimensions or examined face in specific contexts, few have empirically tested behavioral choices in everyday scenarios and linked them to a multi-layered theoretical framework incorporating both social psychological models and foundational philosophical traditions [4]. This research uses a comparative survey to analyze the cultural logics that underpin facework, seeking to answer the following questions:

This paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

(1) What are the significant differences in behavioral responses to common face-threatening scenarios between Chinese and Western European university students?

(2) How can these differences be explained through the combined lenses of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions and Ting-Toomey’s Face-Negotiation Theory?

(3) What are the deeper philosophical underpinnings (e.g., Confucianism vs. Enlightenment thought) that inform these cultural frameworks and resultant communication patterns?

The central thesis is that the divergent facework strategies of Chinese and Western European students are predictable outcomes of their cultural value systems. Specifically, the contrast between a collectivistic, high-power-distance culture oriented toward social harmony and an individualistic, low-power-distance culture oriented toward personal autonomy can explain most observed differences [5][6].

2. Theoretical Frameworks: From Cultural Dimensions to Interactional Facework

To explain the observed differences in communication, this study uses a multi-level theoretical approach, moving from macro-level cultural values to micro-level communicative acts.

2.1 Hofstede's Dimensions of National Culture: A Critical Re-evaluation

Geert Hofstede's work provides a foundational vocabulary for cross-cultural analysis [7][8]. His model, later expanded to six dimensions, quantifies national cultural tendencies [9]:

Power Distance Index (PDI): The extent to which less powerful members of a society accept unequal power distribution.

Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV): The degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. Individualistic cultures prioritize personal achievement, whereas collectivistic cultures prioritize group loyalty.

Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS): The distribution of emotional roles. "Masculine" societies value assertiveness and competition, while "feminine" societies prioritize cooperation and quality of life.

Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI): A society's tolerance for ambiguity. High UAI cultures maintain rigid codes of belief, while low UAI cultures are more comfortable with unstructured situations.

Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation (LTO): A society's temporal focus. Long-term orientation is pragmatic and future-oriented, while short-term orientation emphasizes tradition.

Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR): The extent to which a society allows free gratification of basic human drives.

Despite critiques regarding its corporate origins (IBM), data age, and potential for oversimplification[10], Hofstede's framework remains a valuable heuristic for identifying influential cultural tendencies (Hofstede, 2011). Table 1 presents the scores for China and three representative Western European nations.

Table 1. Hofstede's 6-D Model Scores for China and Representative Western European Nations

Cultural Dimension	China	Germany	Sweden	United Kingdom
Power Distance (PDI)	80	35	31	35
Individualism (IDV)	20	67	71	89
Masculinity (MAS)	66	66	5	66
Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI)	30	65	29	35
Long-Term Orientation (LTO)	87	83	53	51
Indulgence (IVR)	24	40	78	69

Note: Scores are on a 0-100 scale.

2.2 The Sociological Concept of 'Face': A Cross-Cultural Perspective

The academic concept of "face" is a loan translation from Chinese, describing honor and prestige [11]. In Chinese culture, it is a dualistic concept comprising "lian" and "mianzi" [12]. Lian refers to an individual's internal moral character, while mianzi represents external social prestige accrued through success and connections [13].

The Western conceptualization was influentially articulated by sociologist Erving Goffman (1967), who defined face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself". This concept is often simplified to notions of reputation management, contrasting with the Chinese view of face as a reflection of moral standing within a collective versus a positive self-image of an autonomous individual [14].

2.3 Ting-Toomey's Face-Negotiation Theory (FNT) and Politeness Theory

Stella Ting-Toomey's Face-Negotiation Theory (FNT) connects macro-level cultural values to the micro-level management of face [15]. FNT posits that culture, particularly the Individualism-Collectivism and Power Distance dimensions, influences whether individuals prioritize self-face (one's own image), other-face (the other party's image), or mutual-face (concern for the relationship) (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). A key prediction is that members of individualistic cultures tend to prioritize self-face, leading to direct conflict styles, while members of collectivistic cultures prioritize other- and mutual-face, resulting in more indirect styles (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003).

Complementing FNT, Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory analyzes linguistic strategies used in facework. It is built on the idea of Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) — actions that risk damaging someone's positive face (the desire to be approved of) or negative face (the desire for autonomy). The strategies used to mitigate FTAs, from direct to indirect, map onto the facework choices investigated in this study.

2.4 Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, cross-cultural comparative design using hypothetical social scenarios to compare facework strategies between two cultural groups.

2.4.1 Participants and Sampling

The target population consisted of university students from the People's Republic of China and a composite group from Western European nations. Data were collected via online platforms and educational institutions using a convenience sampling method. This non-random approach means the findings are indicative of cultural tendencies within this demographic rather than being statistically generalizable.

2.4.2 Instrument

The primary instrument was a 15-item questionnaire presenting common scenarios involving a potential FTA (e.g., public criticism, social faux pas). For each scenario, four multiple-choice options represented a spectrum of facework strategies, from direct and self-face-oriented to indirect and other-face-oriented. The questionnaire underwent rigorous translation and cultural adaptation to ensure conceptual equivalence.

2.4.3 Procedure

The questionnaire was administered on platforms like SurveyMonkey, with links distributed through email and social media forums frequented by the target populations. All participants provided informed consent, and their anonymity was guaranteed.

2.4.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis strategy combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. First, the quantitative data from the multiple-choice responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentage distributions for each response option were calculated separately for the Chinese and Western European cohorts. This allowed for a direct comparison and the identification of significant discrepancies in behavioral preferences. Following this quantitative analysis, the results were subjected to a qualitative, theory-driven interpretation. The patterns of response were systematically analyzed through the theoretical lenses of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Ting-Toomey's Face-Negotiation Theory, and Politeness Theory, as detailed in the preceding section.

2.5 Results

The analysis combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. First, descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) were calculated for the Chinese and Western European cohorts to identify significant differences in preferences. Following this, a qualitative, theory-driven interpretation was conducted, analyzing the response patterns through the lenses of Hofstede's dimensions, FNT, and Politeness Theory.

2.5.1 Responding to Public Challenge and Criticism

When faced with public criticism for a misinterpretation (Question 1), Chinese respondents overwhelmingly chose to "calmly clarify the original intention and resolve the misunderstanding" (69%) or "apologize for the confusion caused" (28%). In contrast, 40% of Western European respondents chose to "assertively defend their position and refute the criticism," a much higher propensity for direct confrontation.

2.5.2 Managing Social Obligations and Etiquette

In a scenario involving a guest arriving late (Question 2), the Chinese cohort demonstrated a strong inclination to avoid embarrassment, with most choosing to either welcome the guest graciously (38%) or ignore the tardiness (53%). While Western Europeans also largely overlooked the lateness, a notable 20% expressed mild disappointment, a choice nearly absent in the Chinese data. A more pronounced difference appeared when adhering to a local cultural norm (Question 7: Removing shoes). An overwhelming 84% of Chinese students chose to "follow the cultural norm," whereas 52% of Western European students opted to "keep their shoes on and explain their own cultural habits," prioritizing individual practice over conformity.

2.5.3 Protecting Personal Image and Reputation

In response to a friend posting an unflattering photo online (Question 4), 88% of the Chinese cohort chose to "privately ask the friend to remove the picture." While a majority of Western Europeans (70%) also preferred this option, 26% chose public or retaliatory actions, such as making a humorous public comment (14%) or posting an unflattering picture of the friend in return (12%).

2.5.4 Reacting to Praise and Achievement

When receiving a prestigious award (Question 9), 100% of Chinese respondents chose to "express gratitude and acknowledge the support of others (team, family, etc.)." This aligns with cultural values of modesty and crediting the collective. In contrast, over 60% of Western European respondents combined gratitude with "strongly recognizing their own

abilities and efforts," reflecting cultural acceptance of acknowledging personal merit.

Table 2. Summary of Key Response Discrepancies in Selected Scenarios

Scenario Description	Dominant Chinese Response (Option & %)	Dominant Western European Response (Option & %)	Key Difference
Q1: Public Criticism	A: Clarify calmly (69%)	C: Defend assertively (40%)	Chinese students prioritize de-escalation; European students prioritize self-defense.
Q4: Unflattering Photo	A: Ask friend privately to remove (88%)	A: Ask friend privately to remove (70%)	While both prefer private requests, European students show higher willingness for public or retaliatory actions (26% combined).
Q7: Removing Shoes	A: Follow the local norm (84%)	C: Keep shoes on, explain own culture (52%)	Chinese students prioritize conformity to social rules; European students prioritize individual autonomy.
Q9: Receiving Award	A: Express gratitude, credit others (100%)	A/C: Gratitude & self-recognition (60%+)	Chinese response is exclusively other-focused; European response balances gratitude with self-acknowledgment.

Source: Data derived from the questionnaire analysis presented in the source material.

3. Discussion: Interpreting the Discrepancies Through Cultural Lenses

The results demonstrate a consistent pattern of divergence in facework strategies, which can be interpreted through established cultural models and their philosophical foundations.

3.1 Power Distance and Individualism-Collectivism as Primary Drivers

The findings align strongly with Hofstede's dimensions and FNT. China's high PDI (80) and low IDV (20) scores foster a culture where maintaining harmony and showing deference are paramount, leading to a focus on other-face and mutual-face concerns (Hofstede et al., 2010; Ting-Toomey, 2017). This explains the preference for calm clarification in Q1 and crediting the collective in Q9. Conversely, the low PDI (31-35) and high IDV (67-89) scores of the Western European nations cultivate a preference for direct communication and protecting individual autonomy, or self-face. The choice to defend assertively (Q1) and prioritize one's own habits (Q7) are clear self-face protection strategies.

3.2 Philosophical Underpinnings: Confucian Harmony vs. Enlightenment Individualism

These cultural dimensions are rooted in centuries-old philosophical traditions. The Chinese preference for harmony and indirectness is deeply embedded in Confucian philosophy. The concepts of "li", or proper social conduct, and "ren", or humaneness, guide behavior toward achieving social harmony (he) [16]. Adhering to the shoe-removal custom (Q7) expresses li, while avoiding embarrassment for a late guest (Q2) reflects "ren".

In contrast, the Western European preference for directness and self-assertion traces to the European Enlightenment, which established the individual as the core unit of moral value. Thinkers like Immanuel Kant championed the use of one's own reason, underpinning the assertive defense of one's position (Q1) and the choice to explain one's reasoning rather than conform (Q7). Further, liberal traditions from thinkers like John Locke, emphasizing natural rights, foster a strong sense of personal boundaries, reflected in the assertion of the right to control one's own image (Q4).

3.3 Implications for Intercultural Interactions in Higher Education

These divergent logics have practical implications in higher education. Group projects, for instance, can become sites of friction. A Western student's direct feedback, intended as honest, may be perceived by a Chinese student as a major face-threatening act [17]. Conversely, a Chinese student's indirect criticism, intended to preserve face, may be missed entirely by a Western partner, leading to negative stereotyping. This highlights how the very definition of politeness is culturally constructed, with one culture prioritizing harmony-oriented politeness and the other autonomy-oriented politeness[18].

Consider a typical group project scenario. A Western European student, operating from an individualistic, low-power-distance framework, might offer direct, unvarnished feedback on a Chinese partner's contribution. This act, intended as helpful and honest (a reflection of low uncertainty avoidance and a belief in direct communication), could be perceived by the Chinese student as a major face-threatening act. It could cause a loss of mianzi (social prestige related to competence) and potentially even lian (moral face, if the criticism implies a lack of diligence), thereby severely damaging the working relationship. Conversely, a Chinese student, operating from a collectivistic, high-context framework, might offer criticism through subtle hints or indirect suggestions to preserve the other's face. These cues are likely to be missed entirely by their Western partner, who is accustomed to explicit communication. This can lead to reciprocal negative stereotyping: the Western student may be seen as "rude" and "aggressive," while the Chinese student may be perceived as "passive," "uncommunicative,"

or “not contributing”.

This highlights that the very definition of “politeness” is culturally constructed. The Chinese data reflects a harmony-oriented politeness, where the primary goal is to protect other-face and avoid interpersonal conflict. The Western European data reflects an autonomy-oriented politeness, where respecting an individual's rationality and right to debate is a form of politeness that honors their negative face (the desire for autonomy). Effective intercultural pedagogy, therefore, requires moving beyond simple etiquette rules to an understanding of these deeper, often conflicting, logics of interaction.

3.4 Cultural Convergence or Enduring Divergence

This study's findings, gathered from a young and internationally-oriented cohort, lend strong support to the enduring divergence thesis over the convergence thesis [19]. Despite globalization, fundamental approaches to facework remain aligned with traditional cultural scripts. The so-called “Great Convergence” may be an economic reality, but it has not necessarily translated into a deep communicative convergence, as foundational philosophical templates appear highly resistant to change[20].

The data from this research, gathered from a young, educated, and internationally-oriented cohort of university students, lends strong support to the enduring divergence thesis. Despite exposure to global media and education systems, the fundamental approaches to facework remain starkly different and aligned with traditional cultural scripts. The so-called “Great Convergence” may be an economic reality, but these findings suggest it has not yet translated into a deep cultural or communicative convergence. Deep-seated philosophical templates for social interaction, whether rooted in Confucian ethics or Enlightenment liberalism, appear to be highly resistant to change, continuing to shape the perceptions, motivations, and behaviors of new generations.

4. Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research

4.1 Conclusion

This study set out to investigate and explain the divergent facework strategies of Chinese and Western European university students. The empirical data confirmed significant and predictable differences in behavioral intentions across various face-threatening scenarios. The paper's primary contribution lies in the development of a multi-level explanatory framework that connects these behaviors not only to the social psychological models of Hofstede and Ting-Toomey but also to the deeper, foundational philosophical traditions of Confucianism and the European Enlightenment. This analysis demonstrates that differences in communication are not superficial but are the logical outcomes of distinct cultural worldviews that prioritize either relational harmony or individual autonomy.

4.2 Limitations

This research, while providing valuable insights, is subject to several limitations that must be acknowledged.

Sampling Method: The use of a convenience sample of university students means the findings cannot be statistically generalized to the entire populations of China or Western Europe. The results should be understood as representing strong cultural tendencies within this specific, albeit influential, demographic.

Cultural Homogenization: The term “Western European” is a necessary simplification for this comparative study. However, it masks significant intra-regional diversity. As the Hofstede scores in Table 1 indicate, there are notable differences even among Germany, Sweden, and the UK (e.g., on the Masculinity and Indulgence dimensions) that warrant more granular investigation.

Self-Reported Data: The questionnaire measured behavioral intentions in hypothetical scenarios. A potential gap exists between what individuals report they would do and their actual behavior in the complexity and emotional immediacy of a real-life interaction.

4.3 Future Research

The findings and limitations of this study point toward several promising avenues for future research.

Observational or ethnographic studies are needed to capture facework strategies as they unfold in authentic intercultural interactions, such as within multinational student project groups. This would provide a valuable complement to the self-reported data presented here.

Future comparative research should disaggregate “Western Europe” into more specific cultural clusters (e.g., Nordic, Germanic, Mediterranean, Anglo) to test for and explain intra-European variations in facework.

The increasing centrality of social media in daily life calls for more focused research on digital facework. How do the affordances of different platforms (e.g., anonymity, permanence, network visibility) interact with traditional cultural norms

in the management of face?

Finally, longitudinal studies that track international students over the course of their studies abroad could provide critical data on cultural adaptation. Such research could explore whether students' facework strategies converge with those of the host culture over time, remain divergent, or evolve into hybrid forms of intercultural communication.

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