

Cultural Particularism and Intercultural Communication: The Case of Chinese Face

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the acknowledgement of the particular nature of socio-ethical values and specific modes of communication is a necessary precondition for establishing an effective exchange between members of different cultural circles. For this purposes, I first examine the value of cultural (historical) particularism as a departure from social evolutionism and a unique way of understanding cultures that will serve as a theoretical framework for further deliberation. Following that, I shortly review and evaluate some theories regarding the nature and the functions of the notion of face, that has long been seen as an essential and pervasive element of Chinese culture. Subsequently, I analyse some of the data collected during fieldwork conducted in China and try to show to what degree the phenomenon continues to be present in contemporary Chinese society. In the final section, I argue from a position of cultural particularism that unbiased understanding of cultural characteristics is a *sine qua non* condition for effective intercultural communication.

Keywords: Chinese face, intercultural communication, cultural particularism, multiculturalism

Introduction

Starting from the mid-16th century, colonialism and growing trade exchange between people from different continents have made the world a “smaller place”. The development of technology boosted this process further, making encounters between different cultural circles not only possible but simply inevitable. However, until the 20th century, the idea of coexistence of cultures understood as entities in their own right was nothing more than a dream of very few intellectuals with insufficient socio-political influence.¹ It was the rapid development of means of communication and socio-political change of the late 19th and 20th century that jeopardised the old order. As a consequence, even subdued local “subcultures” had to be recognised as an integral, and at least in principle equal part of the global society (Taylor, 1994). The idea of a “melting pot” became then a metaphor that seemed to be quite accurately describing the socio-cultural reality of the 20th century. Originally, a term used to describe the assimilation of immigrants into American society (Samovar, McDaniel & Porter, 2011, p. 97), it has been redefined and become closely associated with the idea of “culturally diverse society” (Von Meien, 2007). Although it has remained distinct in some respect from other metaphors associated with multiculturalism (Kolb, 2009), it exemplifies well the idea that individuals and entire groups of different socio-cultural or religious backgrounds can be successfully integrated into one, coherent society. Not only that, its proponents argue that this kind of society is the most desirable and best fits the constantly changing reality. However, despite its undeniable socio-ethical value and its postcolonial and anti-imperialist origins, the idea of the melting pot, cannot escape the notion of dominant culture. Declared openness for and tolerance towards other cultures cannot nullify the implicit assumption of “assimilation by” or at least “integration into” the dominant group.² Moreover, the very belief that such “integration” is possible is an endorsement of social evolutionism with its belief that there is an “ultimately better-fitting” stage of social development. Until the end of the Second World War, the European way of life was embodying this “higher” stage of development. For proponents of multiculturalism, the society consisting of “melted” or at least “mixed” elements seems to be a 21st-century version of the same belief. These contradictions could not, of course, remain unnoticed by multiculturalists themselves, so instead of “melting pot” the metaphor of “salad bowl” came into prominence (Kolb, 2009). Although the idea of salad bowl in its principles is less prone to accusations of logical inconsistency, it cannot escape them completely and needs to face another challenge. “How is a society consisting of groups or even individuals following different value systems possible (what would bind them together?),” then becomes a legitimate question. Even if there were an answer to this question, another rises immediately: How can these different groups communicate, if there is no idea of a dominant culture that “imposes” a common platform of communication (language) and makes one understand the value system of another (dominant ideology)? Isn’t it a fact that in societies that are proud of their multicultural nature, not much beyond the idea of multiculturalism itself is known to an average citizen about the social and moral values of the members of the same society that originates from culturally or religiously distinct group? Is it perhaps the belief, even the most sincere one, in the necessity or even goodness of a multicultural society, that makes it already more “multicultural” and the society also more “multicultural”? I would like to suggest that such a belief helps little in establishing a meaningful exchange between the cultures if it is not paired

¹Two Polish scholars, Paweł Włodkowic (ca. 1370 – October 9, 1435), jurist and rector of the Cracow Academy, and Stanisław of Skarbimierz (1360–1431) who followed Włodkowic as a rector of the Cracow Academy were the first in the Christian world to openly defend the rights of native non-Christian tribes at the Council of Constance (1414–1418) to peace and to possession of their own lands.

²A fascinating example of a black woman “becoming a white male” in her work place can be found in: Singer, 1998, pp. 184–50.

with actual knowledge about a particular culture, its values and behavioural patterns. As Edward T. Hall put it, “Simply talking about “cultural differences” and how we must respect them is a hollow cliché.” (1981, p. 63).

Franz Boas and Cultural Particularism

In the 21st-century, the idea of departing from the evolutionary universalism is nothing new. In the late 19th and early 20th century, Franz Boas (1858–1942), a German-born “father of American anthropology” (Stocking, 1960) insisted on the research of particular cultures instead of armchair anthropology searching for “general rules of human society development”. As he established the first PhD programme in anthropology in the US, he was also responsible for establishing the “four-field” concept of anthropology, physical anthropology, linguistics, archaeology, and cultural anthropology that dominated 20th century American anthropology. For our purposes, the main concepts of his cultural anthropology are of interest. He emphasised that a given group of people represents an integrated and distinctive way of life that cannot be reduced to a phase in the cultural development of humankind. As a consequence, it is necessary to study individual cultures as separate entities based on their unique history. Anthropologist’s primary assignment should then be to describe the characteristics of a particular culture accurately and reconstruct “historical events that led to its present structure.” (Encyclopaedia Britannica/ biography/Franz-Boas). The Boasian programme was then quite straightforward in its premises and very rigid in its methodology, at least in theory. Cultures are independent structures that develop according to their own “inner logic”. This is not to say that they are isolated one from another. Quite to the contrary, the exchange of values and ideas does happen, in a process that Boas called “diffusion”. However, due to the uniqueness and complexity of every system, the origin and the sequential order of the process cannot be properly determined and it should not be anthropologist’s primary concern to do so. An anthropologist should focus on the culture as an independent entity and research it through direct contact (fieldwork) instead of making unjustified judgements about the level of development of a certain culture. Only in this way, one can understand the real meaning of the customs, rituals and even language. In other words, even if from the perspective of another culture they might be meaningless, elements of culture are meaningful in terms of a particular culture and can only be properly understood from that particular culture’s point of view. A similar approach was presented not much later by Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) who believed that only through long-time participation in the life of a certain group one can properly understand the culture and the meaning of the individual cultural elements. (1967). Boas’s students developed and often modified Boas’s programme, making his approach a dominant stream in American studies on cultures. Works by Alfred Louis Kroeber (1876–1960), Ruth Benedict (1887–1948) and Margareth Mead (1901–1978) marked the way towards a more profound understanding of cultures as individual and comprehensive entities. In this respect, Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture* (first published in 1934) is particularly worth mentioning. The main argument of Benedict’s work is the emphasis on the individual character of every culture. For her, there is a “more or less consistent pattern of thought and action” (p. 46) underlying any culture. Culture is then, on the one hand, a product of human’s creativity that is built of “characteristics” chosen from “the great arc of human potentiality”. On the other, these few characteristics form an independent constellation of values, predispositions and preferences that have a great impact on personalities of the people living in the specific culture. In other words, as a group of people creates a culture, the culture shapes the way they live, perceive and experience the world around them. Culture is then a unique product of a unique selection, transformation and appropriation of a certain set of characteristics, that in reverse shapes minds of those who belong to a certain culture. As products of human potentiality, those

characteristics might be accessible or even understandable for another group of people. However, the way they have been “selected” and transformed is a product of a certain unique situation, and the outcome comprises a unique, comprehensive and “more or less consistent” structure, that cannot be thoroughly understood if not taken as an independent whole. As a consequence, every culture has its unique moral system, a way of perceiving and acting that might not only be difficult to understand for someone from another culture but can be at odds with the principles of the latter's cultural system.³ However, this does not mean that even the strangest or most unacceptable values and practices for an outsider do not comprise an intelligible and coherent system in which they have their functions and meaning. As such, instead of being “judged” and classified as fitting a certain pre-established standard or not, they should be recognised as proper values of a particular system. Culture as a coherent whole is then a crucial factor shaping individual personalities, and through these personalities culture finds its way of expression. The main findings of the Culture and Personality School (Benedict and Mead) are worthy of reconsideration in times of the increasing encounters between cultures. Despite all declarations about the necessity to embrace differences, proponents of multiculturalism largely failed to provide a coherent theory that fully recognises the socio-historical uniqueness of a particular system and prevalence of certain moral and behavioural structures in particular settings (Barry, 2001; Kymlicka, 2007: pp. 16–18). The universal character of human nature and humans’ needs are brought up instead. Even though, as Bronisław Malinowski for instance proved, some specific psychological complexes are not universal (1927). This belief in the universality of humans’ needs has been elevated to the position of moral principle, and its rejection might lead to dire consequences. As the motivation behind such an approach might in all respects be worthy of acknowledgement, the results of such thinking are quite severe. In short, it is a clear return to the old social evolutionism and a display of Western cultural colonialism. After all, the very idea of multiculturalism is a product of Western societies and is virtually unknown to any other cultural circle. In the following, I will focus on one particular culture, and I will try to trace the origin, structures and the meaning of one of the “characteristics” of that system, to use Benedict’s language. By doing so, I will try to demonstrate how important it is to approach cultures individually and without pre-assumed goals or ideological biases for establishing actual understanding and efficient communication between them.

In Search of a Unique Characteristic of Chinese Culture

As mentioned above, the idea of a multicultural society, even in “salad bowl” version cannot escape the notion of social evolutionism. The notion of multiculturalism is underpinned by a belief in some “ultimate” and “better” form of society. Without references to other socio-cultural systems, it claims to be “open” enough to include basically everyone and everything. One issue here is that the people, who are invited to an open multicultural society might not believe in it themselves. It seems then that in order built a working society comprised of groups and individuals of different ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds, the first step is to put aside ideas derived from evolutionary universalism. It then seems necessary to look closely at the particular features of individual cultures, without immediate comparison and preassumptions regarding possible generalisation. How then to determine the nature of these characteristics of a particular culture feature? The first step would be establishing points of reference. As mentioned above, modernity accelerated transport and communication and made race, language and even religion much less significant than before. For instance, Europeans are no longer all white Christians, and not all whites are Christians. And while people living in Quebec,

³This trait later found its development in Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), where the sexual ethics of Samoans was in a dire opposition to the morality of 20th century West.

Canada and Wallonia in Belgium use French as their primary mean of communication, people living two train hours away from each other in the same Fujian province in China speak different languages, which only for political reasons are called “dialects”! The most visible and easiest to notice factors, such as skin colour and clothing, and to lesser degree, language or religion are not sufficient factors determining one’s cultural adherence. It would then be advisable to observe and assess the behaviour of individuals, presumably coming from different cultures in similar situations. How do Chinese, Germans and Arabs perceive time and space? Are they punctual, do they arrive early for meetings or are they late rather often? Do they like to have many people around and prefer loud, bustling environments or do they rather prefer keeping their distance and avoid noisy crowds? How do they treat the opposite sex? Do they keep their distance, avoid touching and direct talking? Are status and social roles of both sexes similar or quite distinct? What do they fear and what do they cherish? All these are areas in which culture, understood as a set of values, methods of achieving specific goals and modes of communication, is a significant factor determining particular behaviours (Chiu & Hong, 2005, pp. 32–36). What would then be a feature that, despite the undeniable linguistic, economic and even religious diversity, is being consistently observable among communities identifying themselves as Chinese? One facet comes to mind here. As David Yao-fai Ho argued, “It is virtually impossible to think of a facet of [Chinese] social life to which the question of face is irrelevant.” (Ho, 1976, p. 883). Face is then amongst those notions that seem to be defining Chinese culture and as such can be investigated not only as a social phenomenon but also as an embodiment of the core values and underlying principles. Since, as mentioned above, cultures might differ greatly regarding values behaviours, and particular modes of communication, it is then crucial to understand the phenomenon in its own right and not as a “local exemplification of a universal phenomenon” or an “embodiment of a particular stage of social evolution.” Only this recognition of a particular cultural identity can make intercultural communication an efficient and meaningful exercise.

Face as a Unique Characteristic of Chinese Culture in Contemporary Scholarship

The notion of face has long been known in a wide range of social sciences. From anthropology, through sociology and to psychology, the meaning and application of the term have been widely researched. The main discussion traits consist of the question about particular versus universal presence of the notion (Goffman, 1955, 1959, 1963; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Hwang, 1987), social vs individual/psychological origin and nature of the phenomenon (Ho, 1976; Hwang, 1987; Zhai, 1995, 2004, 2013; Zuo, 1997; Spencer-Oatey, 2007) and finally single or multidimensional character of the term (Hu, 1944; Ho, 1976; Zuo, 1997). Following Boas’s and Benedict’s approach, I believe that to grasp the meaning and understand the applications of a particular notion in specific socio-cultural settings, it is indispensable to analyse it as it appears and is being used in the unique situation of a particular culture.⁴ I will then focus on the research and theories that address the notion of face as it appears in Chinese settings. Due to the very limited scope of this paper, only a gist of the most influential theories can be given.

Probably the first scientific work that has even been published on the topic is Hsien-Chin Hu’s paper *The Chinese Concept of “Face”*, published in 1944. She points out that in a Chinese

⁴The idea of universality of the notion was mainly a result of the enormous popularity of Erving Goffman’s work (1955; 1959; 1967), later followed by Brown & Levinson (1987). Goffman only occasionally mentioned Chinese face as a source of his inspiration and Brown & Levinson (1987) did not mention it at all. Moreover, none of them was conversant in Chinese and had never done any fieldwork among Chinese. As a result, their “universal” theories were construed with little, if any reference to Chinese characteristics.

context there are two terms that in English are simply rendered as “face”. As she clarifies “... *mien-tzu* (*mianzi*), stands for the kind of prestige that is emphasized in this country: a reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation. ...” And further “... *lian* (*lian*), ... is the respect of the group for a man with a good moral reputation: the man who will fulfil his obligations regardless of the hardships involved, who under all circumstances shows himself [as] a decent human being.” (p. 45) As she acknowledges the relationship between prestige, social image and face, Hu points to the psycho-moral sources of the phenomenon. It might be questionable whether *mianzi* and *lian* are separate entities (Ho, 1975; St. André, 2013), but the importance of Hu’s argument as a whole cannot be overlooked.

Following from Hu’s work, and partly criticising it, David Ho (1976) in his analysis of face, points out that the delineation between *mianzi* and *lian* is of a different nature than Hu would like to acknowledge. As *mianzi* is not altogether devoid of moral aspect, some relevant terminology can be used interchangeably. So the distinction, as he argues is more of “technical” nature that an essential difference between the two (p. 868). Trying to define face, Ho then first applies “a negative approach”, pointing out what face is not. Face is then not “a standard of behaviour,” “a personal variability,” “status, dignity or honour” or “prestige” (detailed analysis: pp. 874–880). Subsequently, he states:

Face is the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in his social net-work and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct; (p. 884)

Other researchers focused on face as a part of social positioning and power negotiating complex. Kuang Kuo Hwang (1987) for instance perceives face as an integral part of the complex structure consisting of face, *renqing* (favour) and *guanxi* (social relations). The whole complex is based on an appeal to social ties, expressive, instrumental and mixed, and it regulates goods, tangible or intangible, exchange (pp. 944–949). Moreover, it also allows for social structuration and makes such a structure recognisable (pp. 960–962). Face is then, on the one hand, social capital, on the other a result of a socially recognised position. Xuewei Zhai (1995; 2004; 2013), similarly to Hwang, associates face with power and favours seeing this as an essential structure of Chinese social and communicational culture (1995). In his later work, he summarises face as a self-evaluation and psychological position in other’s mind (Zhai, 2004, p. 55).

Another tendency in contemporary research on Chinese face focuses on its role in preserving social concord. For Stella Ting-Toomey, the main characteristics of the Chinese notion of face are face-giving, other directed-face and face-honouring that comprise what she calls the face-negotiation model that is an essential component of collectivist cultures (1988). Wenshan Jia, however, insists that face and facework is “a typical Chinese conflict-preventive mechanism and a primary means to cultivate harmonious human relations in Chinese social life” (Jia, 1997–8). For Chang and Hold (1994) Chinese *mien-tzu* (*mianzi*), emphasises a human relationship whereas the Western notion of face, the one proposed by Goffman, is mainly a form of “impression management.” (1994, p.127).

Other researchers put stress on the relationship between face and identity. For Scollon and Scollon, face should be seen as an “interpersonal identity of individuals in communication” and the “self as a communicative identity”(1995, pp. 34–36). Bin Zuo (1997) insists, that even though the notion of face applies to other cultures, in Chinese minds it occupies a special place,

a way more significant than in the case of Westerners (p. 51). Face, especially *lian*, is a central component of the Chinese personality. It is not only a component that is involved with social positioning and communication, but is a cornerstone of individual identity in Chinese society (p. 60). Helen Spencer-Oatey (2007), emphasises similar point. As she states:

I propose that in cognitive terms, face and identity are similar in that both relate to the notion of “self”-image (including individual, relational and collective construals of self), and both comprise multiple self-aspects or attributes. However, face is only associated with attributes that are affectively sensitive to the claimant. It is associated with positively evaluated attributes that the claimant wants others to acknowledge (explicitly or implicitly), and with negatively evaluated attributes that the claimant wants others NOT to ascribe to him/her (p. 644).

Face in Practice

As mentioned above, face has long been seen as an essential and pervasive element of Chinese culture. Despite the severe critique by revolutionary intellectuals of the early 20th century (Lu, 1918; Lin, 1935), simple observation of the everyday life of Chinese people shows that consideration about one’s “face” is still a vital force determining social behaviour. To be more specific, below I will shortly present a few situations in which face played a significant role, either as a desired good or as a displayed quality.

One of the situations that is inevitably mired in connotations with a desire for social recognition and need of ostensive display of social position is a wedding. The whole process that has recently become an elaborated ceremony resembling old-times weddings is an event that involves the entire community and its attention. Without going into a detailed presentation and analysis, two elements of the ceremony are providing us with sufficient material for understanding the place of face in this most social situation. First, one is the picking-up of the bride from her house by the groom. Anywhere between seven to over twenty decorated sedan cars drive to the bride’s living compound and block all the ways around the block. Once asked, why so many cars are needed to pick up just one person, the usual answer is that it the wedding is a serious event of one’s life, and the bride is a person of great value. It would become the object of neighbours’ mockery if there were no a proper entourage accompanying her. The bride and her family would “lose face” if the proper appreciation of the bride and her family by the display of the groom’s wealth was not performed. Another aspect of the wedding, the wedding banquet serves similar purposes. Pricy banquettes at five-stars hotels have become an indispensable element of every wedding of middle-class Chinese (Goodman, 2014). Other life-cycle rituals, such as the birth of a child and funerals serve similar purposes.

Places of public utility frequently witness a display and struggle for face as well. Once, as a participant observer I witnessed and recorded an eye-catching exchange that happened on the Shanghai metro system. One of the commuters, around 35 years of age, was eating a little sausage and drinking tea on the train. His clothes and two huge bags he carried indicated that he was from the countryside. Once he finished, he threw the trash on the floor, stood up and bluntly walked away, stopping by another exit door. Two women sitting across the aisle did not pay much attention to the situation until they saw a foreigner looking at it. One immediately stood up and started cleaning after the man. Once the man noticed her picking up the trash, at first being surprised, he rushed towards the seat he just occupied and rubbing his head started to apologise to the women. “*I am sorry, I am sorry. I am truly sorry. Please, forgive me, real*

shame on me,” he could be heard saying. The woman looked at him first with a bit of disgust and then with some understanding. She nodded her head and mumbled “*That’s fine, no worries.*” She went back to her seat, and the man, very ashamed by now, picked up all the rubbish and apologising to the woman and other passengers around. He rushed to his bags and exited at the next station.

For an observer unfamiliar with the notion of Chinese face, the whole situation could be seen as not much more than a display of lack of manners by the man. He was not from the city, and he could be not very well accustomed to the proper code of behaviour required in this situation. Personal arrogance might also be added on top of that. However, the reaction of the woman sitting across is a bit more intriguing, and the way the man reacted to her behaviour is even more interesting. At first, she did not pay any attention even though she saw what the man was doing. Once she spotted a glance from a foreigner, she seemed to feel obliged to react. As it has been demonstrated in the literature, face is not just individual but can be collective, national (Lam, 1993). Moreover, as Hu pointed out, face is not just a social recognition and status (*mianzi*), but also a sense of moral integrity, understood as performing one’s duties and up to certain standards. As the man’s behaviour was *diu lian*, face-losing, shameful to a high degree, he was losing his own face, and as a person of lower social status, could be simply ignored. After all, the Shanghainese are famous in China for their sense of superiority. However, once the outsider noticed the situation, some face-work, make up for the situation was necessary. Even if in the first instance it cost the woman a depreciation of her status, as she was cleaning after someone else, the collective moral face of Chinese people was at stake. The man on his behalf, by his *diu lian* behaviour, was trying to make up for his rather low social status. His robust and blunt behaviour was also a display of, or a call for face, understood as social status (*mianzi*). *Shui guan de zhao wo?* (Who can restrict/control me?), is often a spoken or unspoken assertion accompanying situations like that. As he gained some face (*mianzi*), primarily in his own eyes only, even by losing face (*lian*), he felt quite full of himself. Then he noticed that he had lost face, not only the individual moral face but also the collective one, a source of identity, especially for the ones of lower social or political status. This outweighed the one he gained, the little markup of his social status. The display of the mixture of the transactional model proposed by Hwang and identity model proposed by Zuo or Spencer-Oatey can be seen here.

On another occasion, I observed an interesting exchange between two individuals and others surrounding them that happened on a public bus in Suzhou. Instead of starting the bus after all the passengers had boarded it, the driver turned back and shouted to an unidentified individual: “*The one at the back seat, you have to pay for the ride!*” There was no reaction from any of the passengers sitting at the back. “*I said, come over here and pay for the ride!*”, the driver repeated, pointing to one of the passengers. The one pointed to, suddenly looks like being bothered with something, takes out his phone, that is not ringing, places it by his ear and pretends that he is on the phone with someone. He stands up. “*Oh, I am sorry, I forgot.*” Then he walks towards the driver holding his phone by the ear, clearly not speaking, he swipes the card, goes back to his seat, sits down and puts the phone away. As the driver shouted at someone, nobody at the back rows seats dared to move at first. People standing just in front of them started turning their faces towards people sitting at the back. Then, the driver repeated his request, more loudly and even less politely pointing directly to one of the passengers. The perpetrator had been identified, and he could not keep hiding in the crowd. It was quite obvious that, initially, he was not going to pay for the ride since he simply sat down and gazed upfront. Once it became clear that the driver had noticed him trying to avoid paying and was not going to let him off the hook, the eyes of the crowd were upon him. No comments were necessary to certify that the crowd viewed him negatively. He lost his *mianzi* (“*Can’t he afford a ticket?*”), and his *lian* was at

stake (“*If he can effort the ticket, why didn't he pay? Is he trying to evade the fare? He should be ashamed of himself*”). In other words, his status as a rightful member of the community was immediately questioned. As further consequences, such as nasty comments from other passengers were about to come, he seemed to be caught in this cross-fire and had no choice but to either react abruptly or comply with the driver’s demand. The first choice was not an option. As people in Suzhou consider themselves as having higher *suzhi* (personal moral quality) than people from outside the city, such a move would identify him as a someone from outside the community (Upton-McLaughlin, 2014). The second option was also a tough choice since he would have to admit that he tried to do something socially and morally unacceptable. However, with this choice, he had some room for a manoeuvre. The mobile phone provided him with an excellent “smoke screen”, a mask that allowed him to face the crowd without much further harm to his self-perception and any evaluation by other people. He then “hid” behind the phone and a deferent “*I am sorry, I forgot,*” made the message even clearer. “*I will comply, let me go*” he seemed to be trying to say. Since it was not an extremely serious offence, any further comments from the driver or people around him could be read as a denial of the offer and would probably lead to an escalation. That, by itself, could probably cause the loss of face of the one(s) who would try to push it further. Nobody was interested in that, so some people nodded their heads, others returned to their business. The balance was restored, and everything could return to normal.

The understanding of how important it is for Chinese to be part of a larger group (shared identity), the public image that is equal with one’s social status and self-perception based on it, marks this situation as significant. Closer observation of the man’s behaviour reveals that in a situation when one’s public image is endangered, his/her identity and social status are also at stake. Face is then not just a public image, and facework is not just a simple enhancement of it. It is a part of one’s socially determined identity and also a means of communication with the surrounding others. “*Perhaps I did try to evade paying the fare, but I do know the rules, and I am willing to make up for my mistake, but in a way that will not harm my position among you and my positive evaluation of myself,*” the man seemed to be saying. Other passengers familiar with the code recognised it, thus allowing harmony to be restored. One woman mumbled some words of appraisal of the man and signalled a slight disagreement with the way the driver had started the whole exchange. After all, the parties were actively or passively involved in the face-negotiation process (Ting-Toomey, 1988) with a purpose of restoring a social concord and avoiding further escalation (Jia, 1997–8). What mattered in the end, was restoring and maintaining a certain harmony in the community (Chang and Hold, 1994), and man’s “impression management” and its recognition by others, were indispensable components of the whole process.

Conclusion

Despite the tendency towards “the world becoming a smaller place” asserted at the beginning of this paper, social rituals and communication in a given culture retain their particular character. The above examples illustrate a particular phenomenon characteristic of a certain particular culture and might even not be totally foreign to individuals representing different cultures from the one the mentioned above. After all, striving for prestige and recognition and avoidance of public embarrassment is not unknown in other cultures and are well analysed in the literature (Goffman, 1967). However, the very idea of approaching cases like those above without marking the particularities of the culture within which they occur, to large degree limits the understanding of a particular event and the pattern underpinning its occurrence. That is why David Ho's analysis of Chinese face uses the *via negativa* first, and then tries to show that

simply clinging to one simple explanation does not bring one any closer to a proper understanding. This is not to say that all those terms he deals with have no relation to the term under scrutiny. Quite to the contrary, they all do, but none of them exhausts its meaning. It brings us back to Benedict's main assertion that culture is a unique, comprehensive and "more or less consistent" structure. There is some "inner logic" governing specific rules governing patterns of behaviour. They can be known, but only if they are taken in their totality, without immediate references to even then most similar occurrences happening in another system. This is of course not to say that humans are slaves to their culture and that everything can be predicted by merely knowing that logic and patterns. The role of situational and thus not essentialising factors cannot be overlooked (Rose & Nisbett, 1991). However, even when situational factors are decisive, there are always a certain amount of possible reactions, and the modes of their application differ from culture to culture. By presenting these three cases, I intended to show, how rich in content even the seemingly most uncomplicated and commonly happening situation can be, and how that content can be different for an outsider and an insider of a certain culture. Thus, a person brought up in a Protestant, highly rational cultural circle could see the whole ostensive display of wealth that accompanies Chinese weddings and funerals as an unnecessary waste or even as the "immaturity" of the Chinese *nouveau riche* class. The other two examples could also be read as a display of lack of manners, in case of the "original" perpetrators.

Regarding the woman who decided to clean after the man on the metro, someone could conclude that she did it merely due to her decency. The role of using the telephone in case of the man who did not pay for the bus ride would probably be missed, or at least misunderstood. "*Why must these people always be on the phone? He should be holding the handrail instead when he is moving around,*" another foreign person who was on the bus exclaimed when the man tried to get to the front of the bus. Although all these assertions would not have to be entirely wrong, they do not tell the whole story, and even more importantly, they do not touch upon the core meaning and functions of the observed behaviour. Lived experience, research into similar cases and the reduction of ideological preconceptions ("*We are all the same, we can well understand each other and happily live together, no doubts about it*"), supported with some insight from the scholarship show a different picture.

The primary purpose of this paper was then to show that the differences in perception and ascribed meaning, even in seemingly simple situations, can be significant. Subsequently, socio-ethical values and general aims of different groups can differ even more significantly. Again, this is not to say that there does not exist anything that different groups share, or to deny the role of situational factors. Quite to the contrary; however, in order to attain that postulated peaceful, and respectful co-existence of different cultures, the significance of those different patterns cannot be reduced to the "hollow cliché" of "appreciation of cultural differences". Acquiring perception through unbiased, positive bias is still bias, but analysis of the specificity of particular cultural values, tendencies and behaviours taken as a unique and comprehensive whole, seems to be an indispensable precondition for any actual dialogue between them. In other words, one needs, to know at least heuristically what kind of culture one is about to mix with before one starts the mixing. As this is the only way to produce an edible salad, it is also the only way that has a chance to produce a functional society. As a famous Chinese philosopher of the 20th century, Xiong Shili put it:

Generally, scholars should look for and analyse differences, without neglecting what is common... Thus (while) wisdom speaks about unity, it does not (neglect)

the differences; (while wisdom) speaks about differences does not (neglect) the unity. (Wang & Zheng, 2010, p. 20)

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