AVOID LOSING FACE

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Even an elementary level study of Chinese culture reveals the fact that Chinese people will do almost anything to avoid losing face, and in most situations, they will avoid making other people lose face as well. Most dreaded of all is face-loss is when it happens in front of the outside world. For this reason, it is vitally important for Chinese people to know exactly what kinds of things foreign visitors look down on, and what they admire.

Nobody wants their country to suffer the face-loss that everybody saw in Rio in 2016; "The acting Governor of Rio de Janeiro has declared a state of financial disaster just two months before the Olympic Games is due to be hosted in the city" (Yiannopoulos, 2016, para. 3). Fortunately, the 2008 Beijing Olympics were quite the opposite.

As the 2008 Olympics in Beijing were approaching, the city began sprucing things up in anticipation of the world seeing the city, and the country. The world came, and they were impressed. However, what many people did not realize is that some of the actions taken toward making that impression were unnecessary.

In the years just prior to the Beijing 2008 Olympics, great effort was made to do away with many of the city's "embarrassing" Pedi Cabs (三路车). Eliminating anything that could potentially make the city, and the country, lose face during the Olympics was top priority, which is the right thing to do when the whole world is coming to see you. What a lot of people didn't realize is that most foreign visitors thought those Pedi Cabs were "cool," that they were something to be admired, not looked down upon. In fact, many of the so-called developed cities in western countries also feature these cute little vehicles.

As a collectivist (group-oriented) culture, when the group (or country) loses face, the individual in that group also loses face. Wyss and Thrush (2007) explain, "…collectivist cultures, such as those of China, Korea, and Japan, emphasize family and work goals…Each person is encouraged to conform to society, to do what is best for the group" (p. 123). When people from western countries do not understand this concept, they may inadvertently cause an individual Chinese person to lose face by making a negative statement about a group. For example, when foreign visitor appears irritated by a Chinese person throwing trash on the ground, the visitor's Chinese host may feel embarrassed, and the visitor would likely not understand the host's embarrassment.

I grew up only a few hours from Chicago, which is a great city, but it has neighborhoods where crime is high. If a Chinese person pointed this unfortunate fact out, I would not lose face. I'm an American, individualistic, and personally unaffected by another person's opinion of a city in my country. Now, if the Chinese person were to tell me I am a bad person because I am from America, where there are some high-crime neighborhoods, I might feel offended. This is not a group-oriented offense. It is directed at me personally because I belong to the group, but when a fact about another person or place in my group (or country) is looked down upon, I usually suffer no embarrassment.

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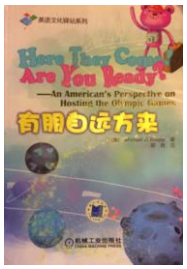
It is this phenomenon that Chinese people need to be aware of if they want to avoid losing face before people from other countries. Unfortunately, many of China's foreign visitors are unaware of this subtle cultural difference, and without intending to cause anyone to lose face, they embarrass their Chinese hosts. So, one of the first things a Chinese person can do to avoid the feeling of face-loss in front of international visitors is to simply realize these visitors' remarks are not meant to cause personal embarrassment to anyone. It's just the way they are used to talking at home. "The average American…may be blunt to the point of rudeness" (Zhu, 2007, p. 275). While their words or actions, according to Chinese culture, are embarrassing, they may actually like you.

Preventing a problem is usually better than having to solve it. In the case of short-term foreign visitors, perhaps the best you can do is try to understand that their negative comments are not meant to make you, as an individual, lose face. But for international people who will stay in China for longer periods of time, it may be worth your effort to teach them some facts about Chinese culture. While developing friendships, you have to talk about something; why not talk about culture? Use this opportunity to explain collectivist cultures. Help them understand exactly what makes Chinese people lose face. Tell them what makes you lose face. Educate them about the concept of indirect communication. Boot and Siebelink (2013) advise western people working with Chinese people, "Don't say 'you are wrong'. Say something like 'I may be wrong. I frequently am. Let's examine the facts'" (para. 10). Don't be afraid to offer your international friends some advice about getting along with Chinese people.



On the other hand, Chinese people can minimize their feelings of face-loss in front of international visitors by realizing just what people from other cultures admire and what they look down on. China has been my home for a long time, and I have grown to dearly love this country. I do not want this country to lose face. For this reason, I wrote the book pictured on the left just before the 2008 Olympics. The general idea behind the book was to highlight some things foreign visitors would admire and look down on, with the hope that they would go back to their home countries with a positive impression of China, not with remarks that would cause face loss. The book, in its original form, is no longer in print, but its newer revised version, under the title 美国老师教你跨文化交流 (机械工业出版社) is readily available online and in bookstores all over China.

One of the topics discussed in this book is the concept of a city or country being "developed." In my earlier days of living in China, whenever I introduced myself as an American, the immediate response was, "Oh, America is a developed country, and China is a developing country." From an economical perspective, I understood their meaning. In fact, now that China has become must stronger economically, I hear this statement less frequently. However, I still hear Chinese people talking about places being developed and places being underdeveloped, much more than I hear people from my home country talking about it. The emphasis on this topic makes me realize that part of face-keeping in China involves maintaining a reputation of being developed. So, when people tell me that America is more developed than China, I ask them for an example.

One of the most common responses to my request is, "Well, in America, everybody owns a car." This statement is true, but is this really the test for determining whether a country is developed or underdeveloped? If Chinese people are convinced that car ownership

determines the degree to which a place is developed, then yes, Chinese people have reason to lose face when comparing themselves to people in America, Canada, and other countries where most people do indeed own cars. But, it is this very misconception that can cause people to feel an unnecessary sense of face loss.

I do not want my Chinese friends to lose face, so I am quick to point out the fact that car ownership is definitely *not* an accurate measure of being developed. As a Chinese person, you do not need to lose face over not owning a car. On the contrary, most people in China do *not need* a car because China's public transportation system is *more* developed than America's public transportation system.

So, how can Chinese people avoid losing face in front of outsiders? First, although saving face, one hundred percent of the time, is not possible for anyone, the risk of face loss can be minimized by remembering two valuable lessons; first, learn what people from other countries *really* look down and what they admire. Most of them do not look down on China for having more citizens riding bikes than driving cars. In fact, for those foreign visitors who are environmental enthusiasts, the great number of Chinese people riding bikes is something quire admirable.

The second thing to remember for face-saving is that China and Chinese people have far more positive features than things to look down on. I remember one time I tried to take a picture of an elderly Chinese couple riding together on a sanlunche (there is no adequate English word to describe this vehicle when it is for private use – for public use, Pedi Cab can be used). I realize some people do not like their picture taken by strangers for reasons of privacy, but by the expression on this couples face, I could see they had another reason for stopping me from taking a photo. Their expressions showed a clear picture of a couple that was embarrassed because they felt I was looking down on them for the sort of "undeveloped" vehicle they were riding. They did not realize that I greatly admired them, and was touched to see an elderly man giving his wife a ride. If only they could have read my mind, they would have known about my admiration, and they would not have lost face.

One of the positive features of Chinese culture is this very fact that they avoid making people lose face. For foreigners visiting and living in China, this a very positive thing. We know that when we make a mistake, local people will not intentionally humiliate us.

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