

# Revisiting Facework with a new analysis instrument

*Face strategies and face negotiation in intercultural communication*

**Author(s)**

Nguyen-Phuong, Mai ; Terlouw, Cees; Pilot, Albert

**Publication date**

2014

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Journal of Intercultural Communication

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Nguyen-Phuong, M., Terlouw, C., & Pilot, A. (2014). Revisiting Facework with a new analysis instrument: Face strategies and face negotiation in intercultural communication. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, November 2014(36).  
<http://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr36/nguyen.html>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please contact the library: <https://www.amsterdamuas.com/library/contact/questions>, or send a letter to: University Library (Library of the University of Amsterdam and Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences), Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

# Revisiting Facework with a new analysis instrument

## Face strategies and face negotiation in intercultural communication

*Mai Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, Cees Terlouw & Albert Pilot*

Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, Saxion University, Utrecht University

### Abstract

This paper introduces the Analysis Framework of Face Interaction (AFFI) which is developed based on a new face dimension termed Face Confirmation – Face Confrontation at two levels: Individual level within the group and Collective level between groups. This proposed framework of face analysis reveals a dearth of research on face confrontation as essential communication strategies. It also points out how the mainstream research on facework has been limited on the collective level of analysis. The authors argue that using AFFI will help researchers reduce cultural over-generalisation; enable them to involve more specific cultural, contextual and situational characteristics of each face case to analyse face negotiation from a more holistic perspective.

**Keywords:** *Face strategy, Face negotiation, Asian culture, Between group, Within group, Face Confirmation, Face Confrontation*

---

### Introduction

The concept of face is Chinese in origin. It was firstly mentioned by Arthur Smith (1894), an American missionary, who, after 24 years of investigation in China, found that the concept of face is central to Chinese identity and characteristics. Smith inspired other researchers to reflect on the thousands-year-old concept. Face was firstly treated as a topic for academic inquiry by Hu (1944), highlighted by Goffman (1967) and claimed by Brown and Levinson (1978) to be universal. Since then, these studies have given enormous impetus to three decades of face research. Yet challenges as well as applications continue to appear, and critique has focused increasingly upon the cultural perspective of the face construct (Jia, 2001; Mao, 1994; Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

In this paper, we first give an overview of face literature with widely mentioned face characteristics and face strategies. We then introduce the dimension of Face Confirmation – Face Confrontation with a spectrum of one extreme referring to face as being secured, and the other referring to face as being challenged. This new face dimension reveals the dearth of research into face confrontation in contrast to a plethora of face confirmation strategies. Next to the introduction of the new face dimension, we place this dimension in a framework of face at two levels: individual level within the group and collective level between groups. The former refers to *my face* or *your face* (singular) and this is most of the time the level of analysis in face study. The later refers to *our/their face* or *your face* (plural) and has not been sufficiently discussed in face literature.

In the last section, we introduce the Analysis Framework of Face Interaction as a result of combining the proposed face dimension (Face Confirmation – Face Confrontation) at two levels of analysis: Within-group face and Between-group face. We argue that this analysis model will assist researchers to reduce cultural over-generalisation and enable them to look at a specific case of face interaction taking into account its particular cultural/situational

characteristics and interaction.

## **An overview of facework: concepts, characteristics and strategies**

### **The concept of face**

The definition of face is imprecise. Even in its homeland, face appears to be a term almost impossible to define (Lin-Yutang 1935: 202). Face is a literal translation of the Chinese *lien* and *mien-tzu*. The former refers to something to which everyone is entitled by virtue of their membership in society. The later stands for the prestige and the reputation achieved through getting on in life, being successful and ostentatious (Hu, 1944).

Yang (1945) defines face as social esteem accorded by others (p.167). He suggests that face is a concept that is broader than prestige, honour or reputation. Ho (1976) defines face as the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim from others by virtue of the relative position that this person occupies in the social network and the degree to which he is judged to have adequately performed his function.

Goffman (1967) conceptualises face as a positive social value that a person effectively claims for him/herself by the line others assume he/she has taken during a particular contact. Brown and Levinson (1987) define face as a public self-image that every member wants to claim, either negative face with claim to autonomy or positive face with claim to inclusion. There are also other definitions of face. However, the definitions formulated by these authors are the most referred to when face is discussed.

### **Characteristics of face along the cultural construct of Individualism - Collectivism**

Although face is accepted as a universal concept and every individual is motivated to present him/herself positively to others in various social situations, it has been argued that face is employed in culturally specific ways (Jia, 2001; Mao, 1994; Markus and Kitayama, 1991). One of the most widely-used constructs in cultural theory, individualism – collectivism (IC), is often used as a framework to analyse face, arguably because the essence of this concept is strongly woven in the context of the collective.

The first characteristic of face along the IC cultural construct, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), is *negative face vs. positive face*. Negative face is the maintenance and defence of one's territory and freedom from imposition. Positive face, on the other hand, indicates a claim for the recognition and appropriate validation of one's social self, social image, and personality by others. Ting-Toomey (1988) and Kim (1993) argue that freedom and autonomy are likely to be the primary concern of individualists while inclusion and approval are said to be the primary concern of collectivists.

The second characteristic of face with regard to the IC construct is *self vs. other*, with individualists tend to use more self-oriented face saving and collectivists tend to use more other-oriented face saving and face-honouring (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998; Trubisky et al. 1991). Furthermore, individualists tend to use self-face autonomy preserving interaction and self-face approval-seeking interaction, while collectivists tend to use other-face non-impositional approach and other-face approval-enhancing interaction (Kim and Wilson, 1994; Kurogi, 1996, 1997; Lindsley and Braithwaite, 1996).

### **Face strategies and their cultural orientations**

Since confirmation of a positive face is essential, a rich line of research has been examining different types of facework strategies and the cultural factors affecting the choice of strategies.

Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) argue that when one's face is being threatened individualists are more likely to use *retroactive strategy*, i.e. repairing damage as a result of lost face. In contrast, collectivists would tend to use a more self-effacing, *proactive strategy* to ward off potential face threats.

The second type of face strategy is *situational* and *internal attribution*. Kitayama et al. (1997) observe that individualists tend to use situational accounts (i.e. external causes such as blaming others or the situation generally) to save face while collectivists tend to use internal dispositional accounts to accept face loss (i.e. negative personality traits).

The third type of face strategy is *face enhancement* and *face effacement* (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998), the former is more likely used by individualists to distinguish the self from others (e.g. "I believe I can do it!"), the latter is more likely used by collectivist to defuse the self (e.g. "I don't know much but I can learn").

In times of conflict, individualists tend to use a more direct *face-threatening* style such as domination whereas collectivists tend to use a more indirect *face-saving* styles such as avoidance, obligation or use of mediation (Diamant, 2000; Holtgraves, 1997; Trubisky et al., 1991).

Further, Brown and Levinson (1987) propose five politeness strategies: (1) *Do not perform a face-threatening act*, (2) *Do it off-record*, (3) *Negative politeness*, (4) *Positive politeness*, and (5) *Do it boldly on-record*.

From this brief overview of the research on face, we can see that the concept of face has been mostly described as a vulnerable self- or other-image that should appear positively. In general, when in interaction with others, face is a value that must be constantly attended to in interaction, should always be secured, confirmed and reconfirmed, for it can be lost, gained, maintained, and enhanced.

## **The proposed dimension of face: Face Confirmation – Face Confrontation**

Thus the history of face research seems to be dominated by a notion that face is a public esteem that needs protection. The literature on facework is cluttered with situations in which one's face might risk violation and diverse strategies to restore or avoid face loss. With healthy academic scepticism, one could consider this being a sweeping position and may require further examination: Does face always need confirmation? Does the face loss always bring negative consequences? Is there any benefit from face confrontation? This aspect of facework seems to have been ignored by the mainstream of face research as being insufficiently worthy of study. This is probably because this concept is likely pre-assumed as a social value that only demands protection, preservation and reassurance while any threats or confrontation may not be desirable, put aside the possibility of bringing any advantages. Of all the theories, only Brown and Levinson (1987) and a few others mentioned some face strategies that dubiously indicate practices of face confrontation (do it boldly on record/ dominate while in conflict). Even then, "do it boldly on record", according to the Brown and Levinson, is merely a strategy to protect self-face's autonomy, i.e. to confirm an individual's right for private sphere, irrespective of his/her social class, age, gender, status, etc.

However, a journey into other realms of social studies conducted by a number of Asian scholars shows that the confrontation of face can be efficient. Drawn on the body of literature that aims at bringing out the important practice of face, we found evidence that supports the hypothesis that face does not always need to be saved and confirmed. We gathered studies and that actually used strategies that aim to confront, if not even destroy face.

### **Face confrontation: All-out challenging**

It is important to note that past definitions of face treat this concept as either positive or neutral. Face is viewed by Goffman as a positive social value (1967:5); by Brown and Levinson as a public self-image (1987: 62); and by Hu as a respect of the group for a man with good moral reputation and prestige that is accumulated by means of personal effort or clever manoeuvring (1944: 45).

Zai (1995, cited in Jia 2001), in response to such bias, argues that face can be moral or immoral, sincere or hypocritical, decent or indecent. Being aware of both the desirable and the undesirable consequences of face practices, Cheng (1986: 341) notes that face can become a disguise and cover-up intrigue, conspiracy, arbitrariness, wilfulness, and personal self-assertion at the expense of public good, as well as true virtue and law. It is argued that the practice of face masks and reinforces a social hierarchy and ingroupness that may breed inequality, injustice and close-mindedness. Since the time that the concept of face was researched, this social practice has been confronted and criticised, especially in its land of origin.

For example, Li-Zongwu (1917 [1989], cited in Jia, 2001: 70) suggests that the concern for face loss amongst the common people is but the effect of a manipulation by a small gang of the ruling class who exploit the common people's fear of face loss. He encourages people to be thick-faced and black-hearted in order to be successful like those powerful few in Chinese history. Similarly, Lu-Xun (1921 [1960]) through his classic work, "The true story of a Q", claims that face is a tool of oppression for the ruling class and a tool of self-deception for the oppressed class. Lin-Yutang (1935) goes further by pointing out that face acts as a major obstacle to justice and democracy. He suggests that:

*when face is lost at the law courts, then we will have justice. And when face is lost in the ministries, [...] then we will have a true republic (p.195).*

If Lin proposes to confront face in exchange for righteousness and law, Mao Tse-tung endeavoured to confront it in exchange for faith in the Communist ideology. One popular slogan used during the Cultural Revolution and after is "be iron-faced and be feelingless". Here, the masses and the cadres are commanded to relinquish their own concerns about losing face; about disrespecting the face of others; and become sufficiently cruel and heartless enough to identify, criticise, and mutilate their class enemy, many of whom include their closest relatives and friends (Jia, 2001: 72). A similar philosophy was witnessed in Vietnam when a radical land reform programme was enacted (Jamieson, 1995: 262). It meant primarily the eradication and punishment of the capitalist class. The brutal way of handling and Communist party's prescription of "direct action and initiative" for new citizen are seen as merely official efforts to overcome some important weaknesses in Asian society (Chen, 1964). The Communist Party considers sensitivity to self-face and other-face as either a weakness or as a tool to be used by the ruling class and that face should be confronted for the benefit of a greater good. Jia (2001) argues that the result of this confrontation is either to ignore concerns about face (Li-Zongwu) or to eradicate concerns about face and to replace it with either law (Lin-Yutang) or faith (Mao Tse-tung).

In the current process of China's rapid modernisation, concern for face is sometimes argued to be an obstacle to modernisation and prevent democratic process. It is argued that Chineseness is something to be overcome and Chinese people should give up their concerns for loss of face and identity and be bold enough to become un-Chinese or westernised (Yu, 1990, cited in Jia, 2001). In the same vein, Bo-Yang, in his renowned book "*The Ugly Chinaman and the Crisis of Chinese Culture*" (1991), describes every Chinese as an ugly China man and Chinese culture as the "soy paste vat". The goal of Bo-Yang's biting criticism is to expose and confront the Chinese's face and, by so doing, to encourage every citizen to be aware of their weakness and to cultivate themselves into a better man.

No matter how effective it has been, this approach that postulates that face should be strongly confronted and barely exposed for the greater good has also brought its advocates fierce critiques at times. Mao Tse-tung's Cultural Revolution involved bloodshed and left serious scars that did not heal among the Chinese who either lost face or violated the face of others. In Vietnam, the brutal execution of a land reform programme resulted in fierce resentment and Ho-Chi-Minh himself had to sacrifice his face to offer apologies and to admit that an error had been

committed (Jamieson, 1995: 262). Both Bo-Yang and “The Death song of the Yellow River” stirred up waves of anger and drew severe counterattacks from the audience in the claim to restore the national face loss (Jia, 2001). Despite the good intention of the authors and the government to have face strongly confronted for self-reflection and improvement, face being exposed, confronted or uprooted has led to a situation whereby the need to protect face was powerfully reinforced.

## A strategy of combination: Yin-yang balance

A less pervasive approach is also emerged from a very small number of studies and cases, suggesting that since the mores of face are a powerful manipulation of human behaviour, they should be retained and used as conflict-preventive and harmony-building mechanism in interpersonal and intergroup interactions (Joo-Yup-Kim and Sang-Hoon-Nam, 1998).

The origin of face comes from Confucius (500 BC) with the main aim to reach harmony in society, and that face is a social control mechanism in the Chinese context, preventing conflicts and building harmony when there is a *balance of face* in social interaction (Smith, 1894, p.17). When the balance of face is maintained, whole interaction overflows with mutual respect (Jia, 1997-1998). When the dynamics of face are unbalanced, social harmony is disrupted by escalating social unrest (Hwang, 1997-1998; Stelzer, 1998). Thus, the mores of face are neither to be completely confirmed nor confronted but rather to be balanced. It is a sophisticated way of both confirming and confronting face in order to reach a desirable result.

An example can be drawn from organisational context. The tendency that Asian workers appear to work harder than their Western counterparts (Lincoln and Kallerberg, 1990; Steers et al. 1989) is often attributed to employee's commitment to the organisation, but a study by Janelli (1993) observes that Koreans often attribute their hard work to the social pressures that are ever present in the organisation such as expectation by their boss and by their peers that they should work long hours. It suggests that even when Asians do not attribute a strong attachment to an organisation, long working hours are still expected under two conditions: (1) workers are concerned about maintaining a positive face and they associate a positive face with the hard work that is necessary to achieve the goals assigned to them; and (2) The employers, being aware of this willingness on the part of the employees to save face, manipulate the effort of their employees through such motivational strategies as *appropriate* level of face confrontation to threaten a loss of face and thereby trigger a willingness to work harder to (re)confirm face (Joo-Yup-Kim and Sang-Hoon-Nam, 1998).

In this line of combination in face strategies, it is of utmost importance to emphasise that a threat to one's face should be applied appropriately, i.e. with a good balance of face confirmation so that one would not feel too much pressure and back off. For instance, sending a message of high expectation (e.g. “I am sure you are going to win again!”) or by sending a message that hints some disappointment (e.g. “I have expected this to be your best work...”), can threaten a (potential) face loss and thereby provoke an employee's eagerness to restore face by working even harder. However, keep using this face confrontation too frequently, using it inappropriately (e.g. in public), or without the complementary combination of face confirmation, the result can be counterproductive. In other words, when the confrontation and the confirmation of face are unbalanced, the consequences thereof can be disastrous and may result in conflicts, powerlessness, withdrawal, social isolation, or self estrangement.

Chinese tactics of negotiation offer another good example. Despite the Confucian approach to social face in China, i.e. more face confirmation, business researchers have argued that Chinese people can also take a highly strategic approach to conflict and face in particular. Chinese negotiators, taking a zero-sum perspective, employed “mobile warfare” where they alternatively harassed, de-stabilised, exhausted, and squashed the opposing partner (Faure, 1998, 2000), using the “face-derogation” strategy with humiliation and shaming to weaken the opponents' resolve. Further, they combined this with another strategy of feigning offence when the other criticises (Blackman, 1997; Pye, 1982) – effective Chinese strategy of maximising ingroup face and “thick-face” (Chu, 1992) where they have the confidence not to take offence with a shield to attack fiercely and flexibly. Ancient and modern Chinese texts have urged negotiators to use strategies to transform opponent's strengths into weaknesses and to take advantage of other's misfortune in the search for total victory (Tung, 1994). Chinese negotiation presents a complex perspective

of strategic and interactive face confirmation and confrontation to achieve their goal. On the one hand, they genuinely practice value giving and protecting face (face confirmation). On the other hand, they can use face manipulatively by challenging face of the negotiators, provoking the need to avoid or cover face loss (face confrontation), and by doing so, they hope see certain actions being taken as a consequence.

At this point, we argue that this balance of face to how the Asians philosophically view the world as being made up of *yin* and *yang*. These two elements are not dichotomous but mutually complementary; not fixed and clearly demarcated but two constantly shifting and interpenetrating dimensions with each becoming the other at the same time. From this perspective, confirmation and confrontation of face can be seen as two horns complementing each other in a causal circle that is continually being re-constructed and re-negotiated in the course of human interaction. In another words, the former can be the cause or the effect of the later. Too much *yin* will provoke *yang*, too much *yang* will provoke *yin*, and with a good proportion of *yin* and *yang* a harmonious balance will ensue. Thus face can be confronted just well *enough* to provoke the need to confirm (which may result in higher work rate and healthy competition), but not *too* confronting because it may lead to face loss and extreme confirmation (e.g. withdrawal). Similarly, face can also be confirmed just well *enough* to nurture the possibilities to confront (e.g. feeling safe enough to criticise and challenge), but not *too* confirmed because it will evoke irresponsibility and unrest (feeling too secured, being lazy or acting out). In the spirit of yin-yang, balance is the key. Both confirmation and confrontation are reactions on each other. The effect of the one can only be understood by considering how the other plays a role. Therefore, it is argued that both strategies should be studied together, and both confronting and confirming acts should be discussed when analysing a face case

In the light of this argument, we propose a new approach to facework which sees face as an essential social more rather than a cultural barrier. With its role as a negotiation agent, we argue that a new dimension of facework should be established that employs both confirmation and confrontation of face, given that these strategies are complimentary and interactive by nature. From this perspective, we can see an enormous gap between what has been achieved regarding confirmation strategies and what has been done to understand confrontation strategies. While studies on the former are abundant, the latter suffers from neglect. Tjosvold, Hui and Sun (2004:353) slightly touched on the issue, but there has been little follow-up discussion since then. We argue that by putting face in the new framework, researchers will benefit from a more thorough approach of analysis, allowing both confirmation and confrontation of face to be seen truly as a powerful mechanism to control social interaction and productivity.

## **Two levels of face: Within-group face and Between-group face**

### **The notion of collective face or between-group face**

In one of their face studies, Joo-Yup-Kim and Sang-Hoon-Nam (1998) cite two examples of face. The first is an article entitled "Saving face or saving lives?", in which it is remarked that rescue work could have begun earlier and more lives could have been saved at the crashsite of the Japan Airlines Flight 123 in August 1985, if efforts had been made to avoid the embarrassment of the Japanese authorities. The second example is an article from the *Economist* (1994) in which the author argues that China struggled to be a founding member of the World Trade Organisation in order to save face even though it was widely predicted that liberalising trade would do more harm than good to China's economy. Both examples involve the face of a group. In the one, it is a government. In the other, it is a nation.

Surprisingly, however, throughout the research on facework, little distinction has been made between the concept of face when referring to an individual's public esteem and the concept of face when referring to a collective social image. Some universal face characteristics such as that of Goffman or Brown and Levinson analyse face exclusively at individual level. This individual analysis framework is the result of face studies being conducted mainly in the West, focused heavily on individualistic needs and rely upon the individualistic nature (Gu, 1990; Kasper, 1997:

379; Mao, 1994; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; for review see Vilkki, 2006). To be more specific, Jia (2001: 58–61) criticises that Goffman's notion of face centres around self, suggesting that face is an *individual's end value* and facework is just a set of rational strategies to help an individual overcome barriers in order to achieve the end value. He further notes that the politeness theories of Brown and Levinson does not see face as a *group concept* and value and without identifying the connections of face to personhood, the nature and order of society. Jia concludes that from what these authors describe as their model person, “one can infer that this person is exactly a modern western white middle-class man, not a western woman or person of colour, let alone a Chinese or Russian”.

Whilst the definition of face is usually centred upon an individual's concept of face, interestingly but incongruently, researchers often cite examples and reach conclusions that also involve the face of a collective, as showed in the two examples above. The “collective” characteristic of face thus has been embedded in many face studies. However, only recently it is made stand out in a multidisciplinary study of Spencer-Oatey (2007) who set more insight into the conceptualisation and analysis of face by connecting it with identity theories. Based on Brewer and Gardner's (1996) three-level perspective on self-representation, Spencer-Oatey proposes that it is useful to analyse face not only at individual level (self-face and other-face concern), but also collective level (group-face concern) since human beings can attribute face to a community they belong to, i.e. *our* face instead of *my* face. Hereafter, this notion of collective face in intergroup context will be labelled as “between-group” face, distinguishing it from the notion of individual face in intragroup context, which will be labelled as “within-group” face. The following sections will move on to gather related studies to bring further insight into the issues of face at this newly proposed analysis level.

## Two characteristics of Between-group Face

A rich line of intergroup research proves that the level of competition is significantly higher between groups than within groups, a phenomenon termed “interindividual-intergroup discontinuity effect”, referring to the tendency for relationships between groups to be more competitive than the relationship between individuals of the same group (Wildschut et al. 2003). We interpret the finding as an indication that in competitive environment, between-group face is easier to be triggered and provoked than within-group face, that at between-group level, group face is likely to be more *salient*.

Next, research also shows that between-group competition exerts significant influence on group output by enhancing productivity and within-group cooperation (Bornstein et al., 2002; Gunnthorsdottir and Rapoport, 2006; Nalbantian and Schotter, 1997; Tan and Bolle, 2007). This finding is argued to have deep evolutionary roots. Melotti (1985) points out that both Darwin and the co-discoverer of natural selection Wallace stressed that it was not “individual selection” but “group selection” or “between group competition” that played an important role in human beings development. Darwin further remarks that competition between groups had to be combined with cooperation within group. By this, Darwin emphasises the group-basis of evolution and contradicts the notion of the Hobbesian war of each against all as the normal state of existence. Between-group competition holds account for fostering the growth of creative intelligence, and group behaviours, notably those which promote within-group cooperation (McGregor, 1987; Melotti, 1985). With a rich supporting line of research in organization, regarding to face issue, we interpret these findings as an indication that *superior productivity* can be expected as a result of between-group face competition as each group makes attempts to protect their group image.

## The characteristics of between-group face's characteristics along the IC construct

In the previous section, research has indicated that at within-group face level, collectivists tend to orient themselves towards the *positive face* and *other-face* end whilst individualists tend to orient themselves towards the *negative face* and *self-face*. In other words, at individual level, group members from collectivistic cultures are more concerned with inclusion, approval and the face of others, whilst group members from individualistic cultures are more concerned with exclusion, autonomy and the face of self.

However, at the group level, we found that this position tends to reverse. In a study of Chen et al. (1997, 2002), the



authors show that when individuals perform well but the rest of the group do not, Americans show a more positive attitude toward other group than toward their own group (i.e. giving face to *other* group: other-face oriented), whereas the Chinese show a positive ingroup attitude despite the group's poorer performance (i.e. giving face to *self* group: self-face oriented).

Furthermore, collectivistic values indicate that people from this culture have the tendency to create their group structure more tightly and tensely with less flexible borders separating them from other groups. Group memberships are normally inherited and more difficult to earn. This indicates a tendency more towards *negative-face* group orientation rather than *positive-face* group orientation.

Thus at between-group level of face concern, collectivists tend to focus more on *negative* group face and *self* group face. In comparison with collectivists, individualists may be less pervasive with a certain degree of orienting more toward *positive* group face and *other* group face than collectivists – a situation that is the reversal of what was previously understood at within-group level of face concern (table 1).

**Table 1:** *The reversed characteristics of face along IC construct at two levels: within group and between group*

	<b>Within-group</b>	<b>Between-group</b>
<b>Individualistic</b>	negative face / self face	positive face / other face
<b>Collectivistic</b>	positive face / other face	negative face /self face

To the best of our understanding, no prior studies have taken notice of this reversal, arguably because, despite Spencer-Oatey's initiatives, little studies followed up, and face has never been thoroughly analysed at two distinguished levels. Again, we take indication from intergroup studies and propose that this reversal is probably caused by much stronger *ingroup favouritism*, *outgroup deterioration* and *interpersonal-intergroup discontinuity* among collectivists (Chen et al., 2002; Triandis, 1995; Triandis, McCusker, and Hui, 1990). In this culture, between-group face is so much more competitive and so much more salient than within-group face that its significant impact can "switch" perception and practice of face at group level.

This striking salience of face at between-group level among collectivists can be better understood through a case study presented in Jia (2001). In a Chinese bowling alley, after a customer made a big fuss out of a trivial incident and threatened to punish the bowling centre with his political power, the Chinese manager chose to sacrifice her face by kneeling down to offer a cup of tea to this customer. This was an act of apology to the customer. The kneeling took place in front of all the bowling staff and all of the customer's colleagues.

Jia (2001), by presenting this case study, argues that for collectivists, face at group level is far more sensitive than face at individual level. The customer might not have so rudely demanded that the manager kneel down before him if his subordinates had not been present and they had not encouraged him to defend their face. By this time, the face involved in this situation was no longer the individual face of the boss but the group face of the company as a whole. Similarly, the manager might not have knelt down had she been concerned only for her own face and not that of the bowling centre. Stronger even, she supported between-group face at the expense of within-group face. While the face of her own company and the customer's company is saved, her self-face was dramatically exposed and destroyed. This case study shows that group dynamics can exaggerate the importance of an interpersonal face conflict and help escalate it into an intergroup face conflict with severe face loss.

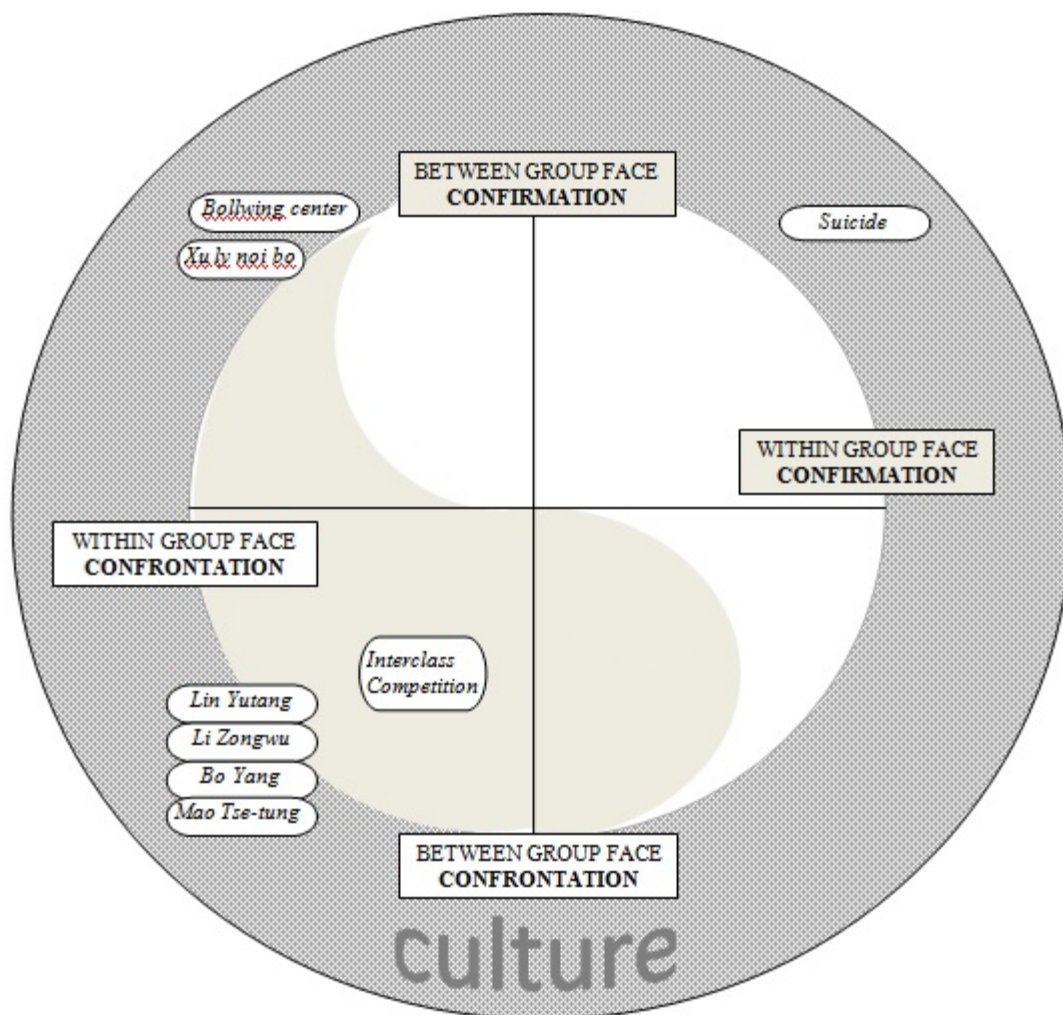
Another illustration of the remarkable salience of face at between-group level among collectivists is the term itself in Vietnamese language. Face in this culture never stands alone. It should always be accompanied by another word

addressing whose face it is referring to. Thus we have “individual face” (*thể diện cá nhân*), and numerous other group faces such as “family’s face” (*thể diện gia đình*), “company’s face” (*thể diện cơ quan*), or “national face” (*thể diện quốc gia*). Before every international contest, the Vietnamese athletes would take a vow in front of the national flag to do their best to honour their “national face” in the competition with other nations. It is not attributed to personal face.

The salience of between-group face in collectivistic cultures also partly explains why communism achieved such great success in collective nations and still controls China, Vietnam, North Korea and Cuba. Jia (2001: 82) argues that the goal of the communist party is to transform the *clan or family-based face system* into the *political class-based face system*. In a sense, this switch from one group-based face to another group-based face is likely to be more consistent with the host culture than the switch from a group-based face system to an individual-based face system that democracy may require.

## The proposed Analysis Framework of Face Interaction (AFFI)

Building on the new dimension of Face Confirmation – Face Confrontation and the two levels of face Within group and Between groups, we propose the Analysis Framework of Face Interaction (AFFI) that is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Analysis Framework of Face Interaction (AFFI) with map of illustrative / hypothesised positions of

*presented cases.*

We argue that this new framework resolves some shortcoming in the theoretical research of facework. Firstly, face is recognized as a cultural element that perpetually exists rather than a cultural barrier that should always be protected or overcome, as usually portrayed by mainstream studies. From this standpoint, face is seen as a dynamic motivation for social interaction, and face strategies can be studied more objectively with a broader, more wholesome spectrum from confirmation to confrontation, with both orientations to be given due weight, since both are essential and either can be undermined in the course of communication. With this new face dimension, numerous face strategies that have been identified in previous studies and summarised in earlier section can be systematically located along the spectrum, creating logics of continuity with underlying consistency and connectedness.

Secondly, AFFI provides a more thorough framework of analysis in which both levels of face is taken into account instead of a bias towards individual face as it has been the case in the mainstream research. When the within-group/between-group nexus is incorporated with confirmation – confrontation, the confusing reversal of face characteristics as pointed out in table 1 does not exist anymore. AFFI enables researchers to decode face cases that engage a complexity of individual/intergroup relationship which cannot easily be understood otherwise. One example of such case is a widely practiced solution called *xử lý nội bộ* (Viet-Anh and Anh-Thu, 2006) in Vietnam, which literally means “punishment internally within the group”. When confronted with an accusation, group’s face is confirmed by ignoring the incident, or making an unspecified announcement, or denying the responsibility. However, at the same time, because the sinner has to be held accountable, face confrontation can be made within the group in which the accused individuals will be charged. This solution prevents a collective loss of face and an escalation of the conflict to an intergroup confrontation. On AFFI, this case is situated on the far left upper corner: Highly confirmed between-group face and highly confronted within-group face. The new framework enables analysis at both individual and collective levels, with interaction of face strategies from both extremes, providing a more holistic view of the case study.

Thirdly, as can be seen in Figure 1, culture is not classified in dimensions but denoted as a context in which each face case is operated. Face confirmation and confrontation do not associate themselves anymore with IC, that is to say this spectrum of face strategies can be claimed to be universal and can be seen as vigorously used in both collectivistic and individualistic culture, as a matter of fact, any cultures, any interaction of cross-cultures, co-cultures, or sub-cultures. The omitting of IC as a dominant analysis dimension helps to bring insight into complex face cases that contradict the age-old established assumptions derived from this cultural construct. One good example is the competitive nature of a traditional Asian classroom which has puzzled researchers since it seems to contradict the overall understanding of IC, and it does not sit comfortably with the collaborative notion of Asian collectivism. In this context, group work hardly exists, study is organised individually with each student measuring him/herself against others and not against him/herself (Pong-Wing-Yan and Chow, 2002), the structure of the system foreducational selection and job assignment placed classmates in direct face-to-face competition with one another (Shirk, 1982: 161). Within-group face confrontation is intense as individual grades are the main sources of recognition. However, by using AFFI and breaking free from the IC construct, the two levels of face analysis will soon reveal the big picture. It appears that this within-group face confrontation is often combined with a strong between-group face confrontation by means of interclass competition. By attending a weekly flag saluting ceremony in many Vietnamese schools, one will see that the “the best class of the week” announcement is an important part of the weekly routine where the class who wins the top position cheers and jumps while the others vow silently to overthrow the new champion, surprisingly by competing even harder with their own classmates. In fact, within-group confrontation in Asian classes can be very intense, hardened by the examination-driven nature of education systems and high parental expectation. The tipping point does happen in such a learning environment, to the level of depression or even suicide. The later is basically an extreme form of attempts to cover face loss (Pong-Wing-Yan and Chow, 2002; Pueng-Vong, 2007; Wong and Halgin, 2006), both at within-group level (individual’s self-perceived dignity), and between-group level (family’s honour).

Such a complexity of facework challenges the very core of the IC construct that tends to conceptualise the dynamic of culture in terms of dichotomies. Historically, these dichotomies have been formulated as contrasts between Western and non-Western cultures (the Rest), with the geographically localized cultures as its basic units and

starting point (Hermans and Kempen, 1998). While risking eurocentrism, these frameworks of cultural dichotomies perpetuate the notion that cultures are internally homogeneous and monolithic, thus undermine the immense diversity of sub-cultures, hybrid cultures; or moving away from the cores, i.e. cultures at peripheral levels and contact zones. More importantly, in an increasingly interconnected global society, people do not deal with cultures as a spectrum of independent, coherent and stable characteristics. People wake up every day and communicate with other *individuals*, each of these individuals may come from a complete different culture and may or may not bring along his/her typical cultural baggage, let alone he/she is completely capable of multiple identities, adapting, adjusting, changing, manipulating, creating myriad tactics and strategies in the course of communication to fit in, either consciously or sub-consciously.

We argue that cultural dichotomies oversimplify and are insensitive to the social processes of facework which are complex and laden with tension. Breaking free from the constrain of IC construct and the like, it is more likely for us to gain insight into the intricate nature of face cases if they are to be analysed with a more holistic framework, taking into account the specific and unique cultural, contextual and situational characteristics that shape a particular face interaction.

On this account, we argue that AFFI helps researchers to reduce simplistic cultural over-generalisation such as “collectivists prefer other-face” and enables them to examine each face case with less risk of pre-assumption. In this way, for example, the stereotypic notion that a Japanese business partner is likely to give face to their counterparts will be reconsidered and questioned with a reliability check. The issue will instead be scrutinised from different perspectives with different analytic questions in mind: Does this Japanese negotiation partner represent a group? Which issues should we discuss with our partners in a two-person meeting and not in a group meeting? What is his/her position in the group and how far can he/she go to confirm his/her face within the group? Should we confirm his/her face in front of his/her own ingroup to give him/her honour, and at the same time strategically confront his/her face mildly in a one-on-one meeting to create some incentive for him/her to prove him/herself?...etc

At this stage of development, many hypotheses are based on predictions and assumptions. Therefore all the cases indicated in AFFI should be considered as a means of illustration. We hope that researchers will see the practicability in AFFI and develop different qualitative and quantitative measurements so that AFFI will be useful to map the interaction of various cases of facework. It is also our hope that with further research interest, common features and patterns of facework may emerge. Such findings will certainly add more insights to the realm of face study.

To conclude, quoting the arguments of Hermans and Kempen (1998), values and cultural dimensions don't exist. They are constructs, which have to prove their usefulness by their ability to explain and predict behavior. The moment they pose problems of doing that, we should be prepared to challenge them and seek alternatives.

## References

- Blackman, C. 1997. *Negotiating China: Case studies and Strategies*. St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin.
- Bo-Yang. 1984. Speech given at Iowa University. Retrieved 26 January 2008 from: <http://diendan.svvn-dresden.org/showthread.php?t=847>
- Bo-Yang. 1991. *The ugly Chinaman and the crisis of Chinese culture*. In D.J. Cohn and J. Qing (Trans., Eds.), North Sydney, Australia: Allen and Unwin.
- Bornstein, G., Gneezy, U., Nagel, R. 2002. The effect of intergroup competition on group coordination: an experimental study. *Games and Economic Behavior*, 41, 1-25.
- Brewer, M.B., Gardner, W. 1996. Who is this ‘we’? Levels of collective identity and self representations. *Journal of*

*personality and social psychology*, 71(1) 83-93.

Brown, P., and Levinson, S. 1987. *Politeness: Some universals in language use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chen, Y., Brockner, J., Katz, T. 1997. *Individual primacy and collective primacy as bases for ingroup bias. Evidence from the United States and the people's republic of China*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Academy of Management, Boston.

Chen, Y., Brockner, J., Chen, X. 2002. Individual-collective primacy and ingroup favoritism: enhancement and protection effects. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 38, 482-491.

Cheng, C. 1986. The Concept of Face and Its Confucian Roots. *Journal of Chinese philosophy*, 13(3) 329–348.

Chu, N. 1992. *Thick face Black heart: The path to Thriving, Winning and Succeeding*. Beaverton: AMC Publishing.

Diamant, N. 2000. Conflict and conflict resolution in China: Beyond mediation-centered approaches. *The journal of conflict resolution*, 44(4) 523-546.

*Economist*. 1994. China: Saving face, Nov 19, 36-37.

Faure, G.O. 1998. Negotiation: The Chinese concept. *Negotiation Journal*, 14(2)137-148.

Faure, G.O. 2000. Negotiations to set up joint ventures in China, *International Negotiation*, 5(1) 157-189.

Goffman, E. 1967. *Interaction ritual*. NY: Pantheon Books.

Gu, Y. 1990. Politeness phenomena in Modern Chinese. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14(2) 237-257.

Gunnthorsdottir, A., Rapoport, A. 2006. Embedding social dilemmas in intergroup competition reduces free-riding. *Organizational behaviour and human decision processes*, 101(2) 184-199.

Hermans, H., Kempen, K. 1998. The perilous problems of cultural dichotomies in a globalizing society. *American Psychological Association*, 53(10), 1111-1120

Ho, D.Y. 1976. On the concept of face. *The American Journal of Sociology*. 81(4) 867-884.

Holtgraves, T. 1997. Styles of language usage: Individual and cultural variability in conversational indirectness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(3) 624-637.

Hu, H.C. 1944. The Chinese concepts of Face. *American Anthropologist*, 46, 45-64.

Hwang, K. 1997-1998. Guanxi and Mientze: Conflict resolution in Chinese society. In G. Chen (Ed.), *Conflict resolution in Chinese* (Special issue), *Intercultural Communication studies*, 71(1) 43-61.

*Japan Time Weekly International Edition*. 1995. Saving face or saving lives? Sept 4-10, 4.

Jamieson, N. 1995. *Understanding Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Janelli, R.L. 1983. *Making capitalism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Jia, W. 1997-1998. Facework as a Chinese conflict-preventative mechanism. A cultural/discourse analysis. *Intercultural Communication studies*, 7(1) 53-62.
- Jia, W. 2001. *The remaking of the Chinese character and identity in the 21:st century*. London: Ablex Publishing.
- Joo-Yup-Kim., Sang-Hoon-Nam. 1998. The concept and Dynamics of face: Implications for Organizational behavior in Asia. *Organization Science*, 9(4) 522-534.
- Kasper, G. 1990. Linguistic politeness: Current research issues. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14(2) 223-248.
- Kim, M.S. 1993. Culture-based conversational constraints in explaining cross-cultural strategic competence. In L. Wiseman and J. Koester (Eds.), *Intercultural communication competence*, Newbury Park , CA: Sage, 132-150.
- Kitayama, S., Markus, H., Matsumoto, H., Norasakkunkit, V. 1997. Individual and collective processes in the construction of the self: Self-enhancement in the US and self criticism in Japan. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72(6) 1245-1267.
- Kurogi, A. 1996. Face-negotiation process in Japanese instructor-US Students' interaction in Japanese language instruction classrooms. Paper presented at the Culture and Communication convention, Fullerton. CA.
- Kurogi, A. 1997. An analysis of Japanese language and communication: A face negotiation perspective. Paper presented at the Individualistic and Collectivistic Perspectives on Communication convention, Fullerton. CA.
- Lin-Yutang. 1935. *My country and my people*. NY: Reynal and Hitchcock.
- Lincoln, J.R., Kallerberg, A. 1990. *Culture, Control, and Commitment: A study of work organization and work attitudes in the United States and Japan*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lindsay, S., Braithwaite, C. 1996. You should wear a mask: facework norms in cultural and intercultural conflict in Maquiladora. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 20(2) 199-225.
- Lu, Xun. 1921 [1960]. *The true story of Ah-Q/ Selected Stories of Lu Hsun*, Peking: Foreign Languages Press. Retrieved 26 January 2008 from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lu-xun/1921/12/ah-q/index.htm>
- Lu, Xun. 1960. On "face". In H. Yang and G. Yang (Trans.), *Selected works of Lu Xun, Vol. 4*. Beijing: Foreign Language Press.
- McGregor, A. 1987. Evolution, Creative intelligence and intergroup competition, *The mankind Quarterly*, 27(4) 492-494.
- Mao, L.M. 1994. Beyond politeness theory: 'Face' revisited and renewed. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 21(5) 451-486.
- Markus, H.R., Kitayama, S. 1991. Culture and self: Implications for cognition, emotion and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98(2) 224-253.
- Melotti, U. 1985. Competition and Cooperation in human evolution. *The mankind Quarterly*, 25(4) 223-252.
- Nalbantian, H.R., Schotter, A. 1997. Productivity under group incentives: an experimental study. *American Economic review*, 87, 314-341.
- Penman, R. 1994. Facework in communication: Conceptual and moral challenges. In Ting-Toomey, S. (Ed.), *The challenge of facwork*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 15-45.

- Pong-Wing-Yan, and Chow, J. 2002. On the pedagogy of examination in Hong Kong. *Teaching and teacher education*, 18, 139-149.
- Pueng-Vongs. 2007. Inside the Asian Pressure Cooker. *Pacific news Service*. 15 Oct 2007.
- Pye, L.W. 1982. *Chinese commercial negotiating styles: Commercial approaches and Cultural principles*. NY: Quorum Books.
- Shirk, S. 1982. *Competitive Comrades: Career incentives and student strategies in China*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Smith, A. 1894. *The Chinese characteristic*. NY: Fleming H. Revell Company.
- Spencer-Oatey, H. 2007. Theories of identity and the analysis of face. *Journal of pragmatics*. 39, 639-656.
- Steers, R., Shin, Y., Ungson, G. 1989. *Chaebol: Korea's New industrial might*, NY: Harper Row.
- Stelzer, L. 1998. Trust and Law in China's socialist market economy. *Asian American Review*, 16(4) 137-147.
- Tan, J.H.W., Bolle, F. 2007. Team competition and public goods game. *Economics letters*, 96, 133-139.
- Ting-Toomey, S. 1988. Intercultural conflict styles: A face-negotiation theory. In Y. Y. Kim and W. Gudykunst (Eds.), *Theories of intercultural communication*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 213-235.
- Ting-Toomey, S. 1994. Face and Facework: An introduction. In Ting-Toomey, S. (Ed.), *The challenge of facework*. Albany: State University of New York and New York Press.
- Ting-Toomey, S., Kurogi, A. 1998. Facework competence in intercultural conflict: an updated face-negotiation theory. *International journal of Intercultural relation*. 22(2) 187-225.
- Tjosvold, D., Hui, C and Sun, H. 2004. Can Chinese discuss conflict openly? Field and experimental studies of face dynamics in China. *Group decision and Negotiation*, 13, 351-373.
- Triandis, H.C. 1995. *Individualism and Collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westviews
- Trubisky, P., Ting-Toomey, S., Lin, S.L. 1991. The influence of Individualism-Collectivism and self monitoring on conflict styles. *International Journal of Intercultural relations*, 15(1) 65-84.
- Tung, R. 1994. Strategic management thought in East Asia, *Organizational Dynamics*, 22(4) 55-65.
- Viet Anh., Anh Thu. (2006). Phan lon can bo tham nhung chi bi xu ly noi bo [Most of the corrupted officers get internal charge]. Retrieved 9 August 2007 at <http://vnexpress.net/Vietnam/Xa-hoi/2006/11/3B9EFE0F/>
- Vilkki, L. 2006. Politeness, Face and Facework: Current Issues. *SKY Journal of Linguistics*, 19, 322-332. Retrieved 19 January 2008 from [http://www.ling.helsinki.fi/sky/julkaisut/SKY2006\\_1/1.4.7.%20VILKKI.pdf](http://www.ling.helsinki.fi/sky/julkaisut/SKY2006_1/1.4.7.%20VILKKI.pdf)
- Yang, M.C. 1945. *A Chinese village: Taitou, Shantung Province*, NY: Columbia University Press.

Wildschut, T., Pinter, B., Vevea, J.L., Insko, C.A., Schopler, J. 2003. Beyond the group mind: A quantitative review of the interindividual-intergroup discontinuity effect. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129, 698-722.

Wong, F., Halgin, R. 2006. The model minority: Bane or Blessing for Asian Americans? *Journal of multicultural counselling and development*, 34, 38-49.

## About the Authors

Nguyen-Phuong-Mai started her career as a journalist in Vietnam. She holds a PhD in Intercultural Communication from Utrecht University and currently teaches Cross-Cultural Management at Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands. She has lived, worked, and visited more than 100 countries, and she continues to publish frequently as a freelance writer. Her most recent research interests include Middle East studies after conducting a 9 month field trip through the Middle East, tracing the expansion of Islam from where it began, city by city, westwards to Africa and eastwards to Asia. The result of this trip will be her up-and-coming book "Alone, Asian, and Atheist in the Middle East". More of her writing and direct contact at [www.culturemove.com](http://www.culturemove.com)

Cees Terlouw is the director of ELAN educational institute at Twente University, the Netherlands. His research interest includes multicultural education, problem solving, instructional design, curriculum and ICT development. He is an experienced consultant in cultural diversity.

Albert Pilot is the professor emeritus at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. His research interest includes pedagogy, teacher education and multicultural education.

## Authors' Address

Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences  
Fraijlemaborg 133  
1102 CV Amsterdam  
The Netherlands

### Corresponding author

Mai Nguyen-Phuong-Mai  
[dr.nguyenphuongmai@gmail.com](mailto:dr.nguyenphuongmai@gmail.com)  
Tel: +31 645 092 105

---

Journal of Intercultural Communication, ISSN 1404-1634, issue 36, November 2014.

URL: <http://immi.se/intercultural>