English face and Chinese  \textit{liăn/miànzi}  

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Abstract  
After consulting definitions as well as examples in dictionaries, and studying the research of Wang Li, Brown & Levinson, and other scholars in the field of Politeness, the author has found that Chinese face should not be divided into two types: \textit{liăn} 面 and \textit{miànzi} 面子. Research evidence shows that the conceptualization of these two different aspects of Chinese face is not valid.

Keywords: English, face, Chinese, \textit{liăn}, \textit{miànzi}

1. Introduction  
Through this study, Chinese face should not be divided into two types: \textit{liăn} 面 and \textit{miànzi} 面子, as some scholars have claimed. According to Wang Li, although there used to be those two forms in ancient Chinese, in Modern Chinese there is only one \textit{liăn} (face) for a person. He points out that in the old time, a person had two \textit{liăn}s, unlike the modern man who has only one \textit{liăn}. Just as dignity, self-respect etc., they are synonyms of face in English. \textit{Miànzi} has become one of the many synonyms of \textit{liăn} such as \textit{liānniàn} 脸面, \textit{yǎnniàn} 颜面, \textit{miānnuò} 面目, \textit{liānpi} 脸皮, \textit{tímìàn} 体面, \textit{qīngmiàn} 情面, etc. in modern Chinese.

The finding in this research that there is no Chinese-English divide in face despite differences coincides with Leech’s “Despite differences, there is no East-West divide in politeness”.

2. \textit{liăn} 面 and \textit{miànzi} 面子  
There has been a general belief that Chinese face should be divided into two different types: \textit{liăn} and \textit{miànzi}, therefore the notion of face in Chinese is different from that in Brown & Levinson’s theory (Gu, 1990: 241; Mao, 1994: 454; Watts, 2003: 120; and Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003: 1462).

Some researchers claim that the distinction between \textit{liăn} and \textit{miànzi} lies in the fact that the positive social value in the former is lower than that in the latter (Gu 1992: 13). Others further distinguish the two types of face by quoting Hu’s definition that “\textit{miànzi} stands for prestige or reputation, which is achieved through getting on in life,” and “\textit{liăn} refers to the respect of the group for a man with a good moral reputation” (Mao, 1994: 454).

My impression through studies, however, is that this distinction of Chinese face does not seem to be valid. It is true that in ancient Chinese \textit{liăn} and \textit{miàn} were two different notions. Wang (1993: 77) writes that the word \textit{liăn} originated in the South and North Dynasties (420-589AD) referring to the cheeks and especially referring to where women used cosmetics. So, a person did not have only one \textit{liăn} (face) but had two \textit{jiān} (cheeks). Note the pronunciation of the latter is \textit{jiān}, not \textit{liăn}. The same author (1958: 498) notes in his \textit{Hanyu Shigao} «汉语史稿» that the word \textit{liăn} appeared later (than \textit{miànzi}) after the sixth century. He goes on to say that \textit{liăn} only referred to the cheeks and was not a synonym for \textit{miàn}. This meaning of \textit{liăn} referring to cheeks only lasted till the Tang (618-907AD) and Song Dynasties (960-1279AD). He concludes that it was a long time after this period that \textit{liăn} replaced the word \textit{miàn} in spoken Chinese. Wang (ibid.: 566) concludes that “So at that time, a person had two \textit{liān}s, unlike the modern man who has only one \textit{liān}.”

Hanyu Daçidian «汉语大词典» (Luo, 1990) records \textit{liăn} as having three references: (1) \textit{miānjīa} (cheeks), \textit{miānbiù} (face); (2) \textit{miànzi} (self-respect, dignity), with examples all from novels of the more modern periods from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), such as \textit{Outlaws of the Marsh} «水浒传» (a novel from the Ming Dynasty), \textit{A Dream of Red Mansions} «红楼梦» (a novel from the Qing Dynasty, 1616-1911) and \textit{Deng Ji «登记»} (a novel from “New China”, i.e. after 1949). The same dictionary records \textit{miàn} as appearing long before \textit{liān} and quotes 墨子 (Mozi)’s (468-376BC) «非攻» (\textit{Not to Attack}: 非攻). “The mirror is better than water. It reflects the face.” According to the dictionary, of the Tang Dynasty (618-907AD), the phrase \textit{miànzi} had the metaphorical meaning of 体面 (dignity) and 光彩 (honour). For example: 贼平之后, 方见面子. (After I defeat the enemy, I will have the \textit{miánzi} to drink the wine you offer me.) Lu Xun says in his “On Face” of the collection of \textit{Qie Jie Ting Prose} «且介亭杂文» that “every kind of identity carries a kind of \textit{miànzi}, that is the so-called \textit{liăn}” («汉语大字典», \textit{The Great Dictionary of Chinese Words}, 1988). To summarize:

(1) In ancient Chinese, \textit{miàn} and \textit{liān} are two different notions, the former appearing much earlier and referring to the whole of the face whilst \textit{liān} referring to the two cheeks. Thus at that time one person had two different types of face.

(2) Later on, \textit{liān} began to replace \textit{miàn} in spoken Chinese. So, the former was used in more formal situations while the latter was used as a spoken substitute.

(3) In Modern Chinese, one has only one \textit{liān}.
Now I will analyze the problem in more detail with additional examples. The modern notion liăn has two basic types of meaning in Chinese:

(1) Literally, it is the front part of the head. In this sense, one can only use liăn now, but not any other word including miánzi. For example: Tā meítīan sǐ liăngcì liăn. (She washes her face twice a day.) Here, one can never say Tā meítīan sǐ liăngcì miánzi. She never washes her face twice. The counterpart of liăn in this sense in English is “face” (also referring to the front part of the head).

(2) Figuratively, however, the word liăn is totally different. There are many synonyms (about a dozen) of the figurative liăn in Chinese such as miánzi 面子, liănmiàn 面面, yánmiàn 颜面, miǎnrì 脸皮, tîmiàn 体面, qīngmiăn 情面, qīngfên 情分, miàner 面儿, liănér 面儿 and rēn 人. These synonyms are interchangeable without any change in meaning, depending on context and collocations. For instance, Xiandai Hanyu Xiucao Dianian «现代汉语小词典» Compact Dictionary of Modern Chinese, (1979), one of the popular Chinese dictionaries, says diūlīăn 丢脸 (lose face) means sângshì tîmiăn 丧失体面 (lose dignity). One can also say diă miàner 丢面子 (lose face), or diūzhōu 丢丑, or diūrén 丢人. A Chinese-English Dictionary «汉英词典» (1995) lists liănmiàn 脸面 as a synonym of face, with the example Kàn wǒde liănmiàn, búyào shēng tāde qǐ le. (For my sake, don’t get angry with him.) Here the synonyms of face: liănmiàn 脸面, miàner 面子, qīngmiăn 情面, etc. are interchangeable in particular situations. The same dictionary defines yán 颜 and yánmiàn 颜面 as meaning “face, prestige”, with the example wàiyăn jiànrén 无颜见人 (not to have the face to appear in public) and guáquăn yánmiăn 顾全颜面 (save face), yánmiăn sâodî 颜面扫地 (lose face altogether). However, it also says in Chinese: méitiăn jiãnrén 没脸见人, guáquăn liănmiăn / yâolîăn / yâo miàner 顾全脸面 / 顾颜 / 要脸, etc. are synonyms. All the above sentences are the same in structure and meaning. They can all be grouped under the same word liăn, but not just miàner, which is only one of the many synonyms of the general modern term liăn in Chinese.

Similarly, the English face has its own synonyms, expressing similar meaning(s), depending on contexts and collocations. From the viewpoint of politeness phenomena, they can also be grouped together under the general cover of face, such as self-esteem, self-respect, self-image, pride, reputation, dignity, prestige, public self-image, grace, reputation, shame, skin, etc. (Wu, 1978: 424).

As face has its synonyms of self-esteem, dignity, etc. in English, so liăn has its synonyms of yánmiăn 颜面, tîmiăn 体面 (dignity), etc. in Chinese. It should now be clear that what Gu, Mao and a few others said about the difference between the English notion of face and the Chinese notion of liăn and miàner does not seem to be justified in this sense. With regard to the study of linguistic politeness, there does not seem to be much difference between the notion of the English face and that of the Chinese liăn, each representing a set of synonyms in its own language.
3. Conclusion

Here I want to stress that, through the above analysis, it is evident that the English definition for face seems similar to that of the Chinese face liăn. There does not seem to be much difference between Chinese face and Western face. Miànzi is only one of a dozen synonyms under liăn in Modern Chinese. One cannot equate one with the other. The double notion of Chinese face (liăn and miànzi) does not seem to be justified.

Li Yi (2001: 18-21) also finds that Hu (1944: 45, 457), Gu (1992: 13) and Mao (1994: 454)’s Chinese notion of face is problematic. He prefers Brown & Levinson’s notion of face to the above researchers’ conceptualization of Chinese face (miànzi) and argues that:

In contrast to Brown & Levinson’s perception of negative face as an individual’s need to be free of impositions, miànzi identifies a Chinese desire to secure public acknowledgement of one’s prestige or reputation. They are two different notions and therefore not really comparable.

Therefore, Li already feels that the Chinese miànzi and the English face are not equivalent, but he does not seem to have found the reason. The problem is that this inaccurate conceptualization of the modern Chinese face by the above-mentioned researchers is being quoted more and more not only by researchers of Chinese politeness but also by other researchers such as Watts (2003: 120), Eelen (2001: 9) and Bargiela-Chiappini (2003: 1462). With Leech’s investigation results, this research will probably be able to shed some fresh insights into clarifying a few puzzling problems in the studies of Chinese and English face in politeness.

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