



# Briefing Note

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF FACE AND HOW THIS IMPACTS THE INTERACTIONS OF CHINESE STUDENTS WITHIN THE AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

### Defining Chinese face

*Lim (1994, p.210) contends that 'face is not what one thinks of oneself, but what one thinks others should think of one's worth'. To put it simply, one cannot claim face unilaterally without regard to the other's perspective. One's self-esteem is built up on the basis of others' remarks. If one gets positive remarks, one's self-esteem is increased and, consequently, one has face (Yu & Gu, 1990).*

(Wen & Clement, 2003, p.33)

What becomes immediately apparent here is that 'face' is about actions and interactions and it is about **the perceptions of others**. For Chinese students 'face' is very important – so important in fact that Zhi Tan (2007, p.95) states “no one can afford to lose it.”

Chinese people are taught from childhood to earn, to save and to enhance one's own face as well as protect the face of others. Looking after 'face' is described as being all about maintaining harmonious social relations (Zhi Tan, 2007). This is an ancient and long-standing concept that is complex and often quite mystifying for outsiders. It continues to be of great importance for the Chinese even in this changing and globalised world.

*People say 'face culture' for a reason. It is so grand a topic that I cannot finish here, maybe I can do it in my next PhD thesis.*

(A Chinese postgraduate student)

## **Public space, private space and face**

The concepts of public and private space are really important with respect to understanding how 'face' works. Face needs to be protected in public space and this is why interactions within academic and social discourses at university can be intimidating for Chinese students. Everyday on-campus activities such as seminars can be face threatening.

Face is not such an issue in private spaces. It is important to note that some forms of media (online media such as blogs for example) are considered as private space and are therefore not such a problem for Chinese students. Interacting through these media is a good way for Chinese students to become involved in academic discourses and in the exchange of ideas.

## **How does face impact the engagement of Chinese students in the Australian university context?**

Chinese students consider lectures, seminars and workshops to be public, but also to be formal situations within the university experience. Sensitivity to face-threat is heightened by the degree of formality of a situation. Because of this, teaching and learning experiences are impacted by face.

### **Lectures**

Chinese students are unlikely to ask or answer questions in lectures or in classes, as these are public spaces. They will, however, seek out lecturers after class to ask questions and seek clarification with respect to expectations for tasks and assignments. Lecturers need to appreciate that meeting with them in the private space of the academic's office is much less face threatening for Chinese students. It is important therefore to provide consultation times for student meetings.

### **Seminars**

Seminars can be particularly difficult for Chinese students when they first arrive in Australia. Here the issue of face can be quite confronting. Phuong-Mai, Terlouw, & Pilot (2006) sum up the situation as follows:

*In a group setting, Chinese learners suppress their personal desires, avoid conflicts and hence avoid criticising their peers or claiming any authority (p.7)*

Efforts to 'save face' therefore 'fly in the face' of expectations of what constitutes effective participation in an Australian university seminar.

#### **UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF FACE**

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It's not just about Chinese students and their peers, however. It is also about being considerate of lecturers. In Chinese university contexts, it is not uncommon for only easy questions to be asked in class. By answering easy questions accurately, students save their own and also their lecturer's face. Inability to answer a student's question can be interpreted as that lecturer losing face (Zhi Tan, 2007).

English language use can also be impacted by face. English language learning for Chinese students is very focused on grammatical accuracy. In a seminar context this puts extra pressure on students as they strive to mediate and express their understandings through this foreign language of English. Getting everything 'right' – the grammar and the meaning – and using English in a spontaneous and unrehearsed way are difficult and face-threatening within the very public space that is a university seminar.

[Face is] *another powerful enemy of critical debate*  
(A Chinese postgraduate student)

### **Engaging in group tasks**

Chinese students prefer to work in groups with other Chinese students. One of the reasons for this is that such a group is a more private space and face is therefore less of an issue.

If unable to work with other Chinese students the next best thing is often perceived to be being grouped with other international Asian students who also have to negotiate the English language as well as the content and expectations of required tasks.

Working with Australian students is considered to be difficult. 'Locals' don't have the same issues in terms of language, cultural and discourse knowledge and they are often perceived as having a better understanding of task requirements. Working in such a group is seen to be much riskier in terms of the potential to lose face.

### **So what does all this mean?**

It means that there are needs that have to be attended to.

### **For lecturers and academics:**

- Communication and relationships involving Chinese students need to be built and carefully managed and this involves understanding and taking account of 'face'. It also involves appreciating that Chinese students view the

formality of the university experience as being one in which role relationships and role obligations are considered important and as involving face.

- There needs to be a transitioning period for Chinese students. Zhou, Knoke and Sakamoto (2005) talk of the need to create a 'buffer zone' – time to allow Chinese students to familiarise themselves with their new and very different educational environment. This has implications for how seminars and workshops are conducted. Allowing students an initial period where it is ok to be silent is important. Moving then to providing Chinese students with time to formulate answers, or even allowing them to prepare answers in advance, will help with transitioning.
- Opportunities for students to meet with their lecturers out of class need to be provided for Chinese students not only to allow them to seek clarification and ask questions, but also as part of enacting the relationship and obligations between academic and student.
- Chinese students need to be permitted to work with each other initially but then they **need** to be required to broaden their engagement with their peers.
- There is a need for academics to engender patience in other students. (Zhou *et. al.* 2005, p.295)

#### **For Chinese students:**

- There needs to be an understanding that 'face' is different in Australia and that its loss is to be less feared.
- It is important for Chinese students to appreciate that, in general, there is less need for formality in university contexts and therefore there is less emphasis on face.
- Chinese students need to have the courage to confront the differences they encounter and know that there are mechanisms to support them and that these should not be construed as face-threatening.

Phuong-Mai, *et al.* (2006, p.7) assert that,

*Allowing a person to save face is more important than telling the truth.*

In the Australian university context, however, this is certainly not the case and this needs to be understood by Chinese students.

*Normally, Chinese students are shy for their education experience and the Chinese traditional culture. So do give them time and opportunities to open their mind. After that everything will go well.*

(A Chinese postgraduate student)

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