How face influences consumption
A comparative study of American and Chinese consumers

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East Asia is fast becoming the world’s largest brand-name luxury goods market. This study develops the concept of face and face consumption to explain why Asian consumers possess strong appetites for luxury products despite their relatively low income. This paper distinguishes the concept of face from a closely related construct, prestige, and examines the influence of face on consumer behaviours in the United States and China. Due to the heavy influence of face, Asian consumers believe they must purchase luxury products to enhance, maintain or save face. Accordingly, face consumption has three unique characteristics: conformity, distinctiveness and other-orientation. The results of a cross-cultural survey support the existence of these three subdimensions and show that Chinese consumers are more likely to be influenced by their reference groups than are American consumers. Furthermore, they tend to relate product brands and price to face more heavily than do their US counterparts. In addition, Chinese consumers are more likely to consider the prestige of the products in other-oriented consumption than are their American counterparts.

With its substantial population and growing economy, East Asia is fast becoming the world’s largest brand-name luxury goods market (Wong & Ahuvia 1998; Jiang 2005). East Asians have been found to be avaricious luxury consumers – it is not unusual to see Malaysians spending huge sums of money on weddings to which the guests arrive in limousines, Chinese consumers wearing extremely expensive suits and watches, and Japanese consumers flooding Louis Vuitton showrooms. As Ram (1994) notes, Asian consumers’ demand for luxury products extends beyond watches and cognac to include a wide range of high-price consumer items, even if they may not have secured adequate food, clothing and shelter.
To explain this phenomenon, some researchers (e.g. Brannen 1992) attempt to conceptualise it as globalised, western-style materialism. However, materialism alone can hardly explain why Asian consumers desire luxury products even when they earn a relatively low income (Wong & Ahuvia 1998). Consumers in Asian and western societies may purchase the same products but for different reasons; that is, their behaviours may be heavily shaped by different cultural values. More specifically, Zhou and Nakamoto (2000) and Zhou and Belk (2004) suggest that the concept of face, an important cultural value that influences human behaviours particularly in collectivist cultures (Ting-Toomey 1988), may be one factor that leads to Asian consumers’ strong appetites for luxury products.

Face is ‘the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact’ (Goffman 1967, p. 5). In recent years, various studies have addressed face and face-related issues, such as complimenting, compliance gaining, embarrassment, negotiation, decision making and conflict management (e.g. Brown & Levinson 1987; Kim 1994; Holtgraves 1997; Leung & Chan 2003). However, research on how face affects consumer behaviours is limited, with the few exceptions of Wong and Ahuvia (1998), Joy (2001), and Bao et al. (2003). How face influences consumption remains unclear, and its conceptualisation requires further clarification and investigation.

This study extends our understanding of how face affects consumption from a cross-cultural perspective. More specifically, we distinguish the concept of face through a comparison with prestige. To capture the influence of face on consumption, we advance the construct of face consumption, operationalise it as a multi-dimensional concept, and test the difference in face consumption between American and Chinese consumers empirically. We study these two countries specifically because American culture is characterised as highly individualist, whereas Chinese culture is one of the most collectivist (Triandis 1995).

**Conceptual development**

**Culture and face**

Culture can be characterised as either individualist (e.g. American and most western European cultures) or collectivist (e.g. Chinese, Japanese and most Asian cultures) (Hofstede 1991; Triandis 1998). The basic difference between individualist and collectivist cultures is that an individualist

As we mentioned previously, face refers to a claimed sense of favourable social self-worth that a person wants others to have of her or him in a relational and network context (Goffman 1967), such that people’s need and concern for self-face, as well as for others’ face, influences their everyday lives (Gao 1998; Joy 2001). The concept of face is not confined to a specific culture; as social beings, most people have had face-related experiences such as blushing or feeling embarrassed, awkward, shameful or proud. On the one hand, people try to maintain or enhance their face. On the other, when their social poise is threatened or attacked, people try to save or defend their face. Losing face, saving face and enhancing face are some of the key elements of face-related issues (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi 1998; Chan et al. 2003).

Whereas face is a universal phenomenon, how people shape its meaning differs from one culture to another. For example, in China, nearly everyone confronts face-related issues every day, including greetings, shopping, invitations, and so forth. In the United States, people seldom relate their social self-worth to face and may be unfamiliar with the concept. Hu (1944, p. 45) compares the concept of face in China with psychological constructs in the United States and finds that face ‘stands for the kind of prestige that is emphasized in [the United States]: a reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation’. However, though face seems similar to prestige in some ways, its underlying psychological meaning in China differs considerably from that of prestige in several aspects.

**Group self-face vs individual self-face**

In an individualist culture such as the United States, a person is an independent entity with free will, emotion and a unique personality (Markus & Kitayama 1991). Decision making is done, or encouraged to be done, by individuals, and individuals are responsible for their decisions (Reykowski 1994; Joy 2001). Thus, the individual person represents the unit of analysis for social behaviour, and prestige, in a face context, becomes individual self-face.

In contrast, in a collectivist culture such as China, the individual person is not a complete entity (Sun 1991). For example, a Chinese man views
himself as a son, a brother, a husband and a father but rarely as himself (Chu 1985). That is, the traditional Chinese self is viewed in the context of its relations with others. Therefore, face in China not only stands for prestige for oneself but also for one’s family, relatives, friends and even colleagues (Joy 2001). In other words, face in China means social self-face for a broad group. As indicated by Ting-Toomey (1988), face is fundamentally a ‘social self’ construct in China.

**Obligation vs free will**

In China, under the pressure of the social relational network, a person tends to be sensitive to his or her position as above, below or equal to others (Gao 1998). As a result, Chinese people tend to care a lot about face. For instance, Chinese parents will emphasise ‘Don’t make our family lose face’ to encourage their children to behave properly and succeed in their education (King & Bond 1985). Also, Chinese people are under strong pressure to meet the expectations of others to maintain their face, as well as to reciprocate a due regard for the face of others. For example, in a survey of Chinese businessmen in Hong Kong, face consistently was noted as an important consideration in professional interactions, and the fear of losing face formed the basis for the informal system of contracts and agreements that is common in Chinese business (Redding & Ng 1982). Furthermore, in China, the social self is expected to engage in optimal role performance, no matter what the personal self may experience during an interaction (Markus & Kitayama 1991). As Yang (1981, p. 161) indicates, a Chinese person tends to ‘act in accordance with external expectations or social norms, rather than with internal wishes or personal integrity, so that he would be able to protect his social self and function as an integral part of the social network’. Therefore, a Chinese must maintain or enhance his or her face because of the social aspect of that face.

Compared with Chinese culture, American culture is more concerned about ‘I-identity’ than ‘we-identity’, and American people tend to be more worried about self-prestige than social self-face (Triandis 1998). An individualistic culture like the United States emphasises personal self more than social self, individual rights over group rights and personal self-esteem over social self-esteem (Markus & Kitayama 1991). Thus, an American is more responsible for his or her own face and emphasises maintaining self-face, or individual prestige, according to his or her will.
**Others’-face orientation vs self-face orientation**

In China, people pay significant attention to others’ face because face has the same meaning for others. A Chinese behavioural norm like, ‘If you honour me a linear foot, I should in return honour you ten feet’, clearly reveals the relationship between self-face and others’ face. In the United States, however, people care more about personal prestige than others’ prestige. For example, in a conflict resolution study, researchers find that US subjects tend to use more direct and face-threatening conflict styles, such as domination, whereas Taiwanese and mainland Chinese respondents are more likely to use indirect, mutually face-saving conflict styles, such as connoting either high mutual face or others’ face concern (Cocroft & Ting-Toomey 1994).

From this discussion, we can recognise that face (a pervasive concept in collectivist cultures) differs significantly from prestige (a concept heavily studied in individualist cultures). In the next section, we investigate how this construct influences consumers’ behaviours, which we term ‘face consumption’.

**Face consumption**

As a tradition in Chinese culture, consumption is regarded more as a tool to serve higher-order social needs than an activity in its own right (Tse 1996). For example, drinking alone is viewed as improper; such a drinker would be labelled as in the ‘ponds of wine’. However, drinking is quite appropriate to welcome guests or when enjoyed together with friends. In the latter case, even drinking for a whole night would be considered proper, and happens frequently in everyday Chinese life.

With the fast economic development in the Great China area, including mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, Chinese tend to pay more attention to their face through consumption. As described by Ram (1989), Rado watches, which were priced US$270–2400 in mainland China, are owned not only by high officials but also, and mostly, by taxi drivers, farmers and successful young entrepreneurs (see also Jiang 2005). Currently, nearly all Chinese administrators and higher officials enjoy a salary supplement called ‘special expenses money’, which they use to meet the demands of face (Gabrenya & Hwang 1996). In a simple example, an administrator takes his or her subordinates to dinner, which offers the subordinates face, and gains face by paying the bill, which is actually paid by the special expenses money. This phenomenon is very prevalent in
Chinese society, which reflects the importance of maintaining face in personal relationships.

Considering the prevalent and heavy influence of face on consumption in China, we name this specific consuming behaviour face consumption and define it as the motivational process by which individuals try to enhance, maintain or save self-face, as well as show respect to others’ face through the consumption of products. Face consumption has three unique characteristics.

1. **Obligation.** As we discussed previously, the Chinese must and have to maintain or save face because of its social meaning. Therefore, when consumption becomes a tool to maintain or save face, a Chinese person will have no choice but to mimic the face consumption of his or her social group. Otherwise, that person will lose his or her face among the group and make the group lose face to other groups.

2. **Distinctiveness.** For face consumption, the products must be either name brands or more expensive than the products Chinese usually consume; otherwise, they cannot stand for face. In other words, face products must be distinctive, whether through brand or high price. Because face stands for group face and group interests are more important than personal interests (Ting-Toomey 1988), Chinese consumers are willing to pay more for face products than they would for the products they usually consume.

3. **Other orientation.** Given the importance of face in China, people also must pay much attention to others’ face. Therefore, for face consumption, the consumer must carefully judge the value of the products or services when purchasing or consuming with others to enable the others to feel full of face. Gift giving and dinner parties are two typical ways to show respect to others’ face.

In the literature, a concept similar to face consumption – status and conspicuous consumption – was first addressed by Veblen (1934) in his economic theory of the leisure class. He defined conspicuous consumption as expenditures made not for comfort or use but for purely honorific purposes to inflate the ego and that occurs primarily to offer an ostentatious display of wealth. Researchers further have defined status consumption as the conspicuous consumption of luxury products that
confer and symbolise status both for the consumer and surrounding significant others and that improve social standing (Eastman et al. 1997).

Status consumption and face consumption are similar in the sense that (1) face products are also luxury products, which is characteristic of status products (Eastman et al. 1997), and (2) status seekers want to show off and increase their distinctive social status through conspicuous consumption, and some face consumption also intends to show off the prestige of the group face. However, face consumption also differs from status consumption in several ways:

- Not all face consumption is intended to show off but instead may be to maintain or save face.
- Status-seeking consumers are willing to purchase conspicuous or expensive products whereas face-saving consumers purchase not just because they are willing to but because they have to.
- Face consumption can be other oriented – that is, designed to show respect to others’ face.

On the basis of the preceding discussion, we classify face consumption behaviours into the following three categories according to their characteristics: conformity face consumption; distinctive face consumption; other-oriented face consumption. In next section, we compare these three types of face consumption for Chinese and American consumers.

**Hypotheses**

**Conformity face consumption**

Conformity face consumption refers to consuming behaviour that consumers must have because of social and group pressures. In China, within the same social class or reference group, people must behave properly and consume appropriately or they will lose their self-face and cause their group to lose face (Sun 1991). Chinese also tend to reduce social distance within their own social class through similar consuming behaviours (Yang 1981). Conformity in consumption within groups therefore is quite obvious.

In turn, Chinese consumers are more likely to be influenced by their group members, who all tend to have similar consuming behaviours. For example, according to a survey by Tse (1996), 86.1% of a sample of Hong Kong students agreed that their consumption choices (particularly for clothing) were influenced by their reference group, compared with 71.3%
of the American students in the sample. Also, only 43.5% of Hong Kong students said that they would want to behave differently to stand out, versus 73.6% in the American sample.

Typical examples of conformity face consumption include dinner parties, weddings and funeral ceremonies. Although many Chinese complain about the waste of time, money and energy involved in these behaviours, most engage in them and try to make them appropriate in comparison with the consumption performed by other members of their group (i.e. not too simple, not too conspicuous). For everyday consumption, a typical example might be the purchase of electrical home appliances such as television and high-fidelity stereo equipment; sometimes Chinese people feel they have to buy a television because their relatives, friends or even neighbours have one.

As we discussed previously, due to the influence of the individualist culture, the degree of the conformity of American consumers, though it may exist, is not as high as that of Chinese consumers. Therefore:

**H1**: Chinese consumers are more likely to be influenced by their reference groups than are American consumers.

**Distinctive face consumption**

According to H1, Chinese may appear likely to purchase the same style and colours of clothes, something like a uniform. But this is far from the case. Chinese society has long encompassed a very strict hierarchical structure, and Chinese people tend to be very sensitive to their hierarchical positions in these social structures (Gabrenya & Hwang 1996; Leung & Chan 2003). For example, the Chinese always greet one another with their official positions, such as ‘Head Li’ or ‘President Wang’. Thus, the Chinese behave in ways designed to display, enhance and protect both the face and the reality of their own and others’ positions.

With rapid economic growth in China, consumption has become one of the easiest ways to show distinctive face. People try to purchase different products to distinguish one group or social class from another. As a result, higher-priced and name brands function as symbols to demonstrate the social distance between different groups. Therefore, and unsurprisingly, name brands (especially foreign name brands) demand a premium price in Chinese markets.

Typical examples for distinctive face consumption include ostentatious weddings, gold jewellery, luxury cars, and so forth. This face-enhancing
and face-distinguishing consumption may appear ostentatious and irrational to westerners, especially when, as Ram (1994) describes, Chinese consumers demand luxury products even before they have secured adequate food, clothing and shelter.

In the United States, consumers’ concerns about face are not as strong as those of Chinese consumers; furthermore, in American culture, equality is believed to be innate. Therefore, though American consumers also engage in conspicuous consumption, their connection of products to face and the use of name brands to emphasise their face may not be as strong as it is for Chinese consumers. Therefore:

**H2:** Chinese consumers are more likely to relate product brands to their face than are American consumers.

*Other-oriented face consumption*

The Chinese also emphasise the need to show respect to others because of the importance of face for everybody. Thus, the Chinese will carefully consider face consumption as it relates to others in situations such as gift giving and dinner parties (Joy 2001). In China, gift giving is a way to start, maintain and reinforce social relationships, and gifts are often presented to family members, relatives and friends. These gifts should be expensive enough to match the income of the givers; generally, the price of the gift is higher than that of any products the giver consumes. With this ceremony, those who receive the gifts also receive face from the giver. The receivers then are expected to reciprocate with gifts of equal or even higher value, which in turn allows the original gift givers to feel full of face (Chan et al. 2003). A dinner party is a more subtle face-giving and face-maintaining occasion, in which the host gives face to the guests through the quality of the food, the proper degree of ostentation and the boisterous atmosphere, and simultaneously maintains or gains face through the presence of important guests and the number of guests (Chen 1990). In contrast, in an individualist culture, consumers probably do not relate the prestige of a gift or the food at a dinner party to their social status as much as the Chinese do. Therefore, we propose:

**H3:** In other-oriented consumption, Chinese consumers are more likely to consider the prestige of the products than are American consumers.
Methods

Survey design

To collect data in both the United States and China, we conducted a survey that included measures of conformity, distinctive and other-oriented face consumption, as well as demographic information such as age, education, gender and comparative economic level among peers.

We designed the measures of face consumption specifically for this study. We developed an initial pool of measurement items based on the literature review. In-depth interviews were conducted with six American and six Chinese to help obtain insights into the face consumption concept. A few questionnaire items were subsequently revised to enhance their clarity. We then conducted a pre-test among 20 students in China and 20 students in the US to test the measures. After we deleted some items on the basis of this pre-test, the final scales exhibited satisfactory reliability and validity.

To measure theoretical constructs cross-nationally, translation equivalence must be considered (Mullen 1995). Following Mullen’s suggestion, we designed the original survey in English, then had it translated into Chinese by a bilingual native speaker. The Chinese version of the questionnaire was then translated back into English by another bilingual speaker. Discrepancies in the translation were carefully inspected and corrected to ensure the translation equivalence of the questionnaire. Self-administered questionnaires were served as data collection vehicles in both samples.

Sampling

Two samples of students were utilised for the following reasons. First, the purpose of this study is to examine the influence of face on consumer behaviours in two cultures. Face is a culturally embedded concept and face consumption is a culturally rooted behaviour. As a body of learned behaviours common to a given human society, culture acts as a template that shapes behaviour and consciousness within a human society (Hofstede 1991). Because students are members of one culture sharing a system of beliefs, values, customs, behaviours and artefacts, they may serve as surrogates for other groups in the study of culturally-related concept. Indeed, student samples are widely used in consumer research as surrogates (cf. Peterson 2001). Empirical evidence also shows that students may serve as surrogates for adult groups in some consumer research (e.g. Beltramini 1983).