

## Chapter 7

### Face-work on social media in China: The presentation of self on Renren and Facebook

Xiaoli Tian, University of Hong Kong

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#### Introduction

The internet has become an essential component in the daily lives of Chinese urbanites. According to the China Internet Network Information Center, 61.7% of Chinese netizens use social networking services (SNSs) such as QQ, MoMo and WeChat (CNNIC, 2015, p. 4). Given the popularity of social media in China, much inter-personal interaction takes place online. It is a sociological truism that the way people act or behave is influenced by those who stand before them, that is people present themselves in different ways with different audiences in order to achieve a desirable self-image (Goffman, 1959). However, social media usually involves interacting with others who are not physically visible. These "undetectable others" undoubtedly influence self-presentation on social media in China (Tian & Menchik, 2016).

Scholars of new media argue that social media encompasses different audiences from various networks who are situated together in one place, a scenario better known as "context collapse" (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). Without a physical co-presence, potential audiences can only be mentally constructed when determining how information is shared (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Litt, 2012). Therefore, online disclosures are usually oriented by the "imagined audience" (regular respondents), who often do not resemble the actual audience (including both regular respondents and other unaccounted readers during

posting) (Tian & Menchik, 2016). As a result, interactions can involve unsolicited observers when the discourse is initially composed online (boyd, 2008; Davis & Jurgenson, 2014).

This problem of context collapse and its impacts on self-presentation online are especially salient in the Chinese context because the Chinese culture places much importance on maintaining 'face' (*mianzi*) and doing 'face-work' in front of others within the same social network (Hwang, 1987). Face is the respect or deference received from one's social network (Ho, 1976). Face-work involves the projection of self-image and impression management, with the goal to shape and instil a favourable image. Face is gained by successfully performing one or more specific social roles that are well recognised by others (Hu, 1944); the loss or gain of face leads to changes in social prestige (Yang, 1945).

Social face is a powerful force and is often used to explain findings such as the tendency of the Chinese to avoid conflicts (Tse et al., 1994). However, little empirical work has been done on how social face influences online interactions with a physically invisible audience. In this article, I shall therefore examine how the Chinese culture of face influences self-presentation on social media. I discuss how Chinese users present themselves online, and how this is related to the Chinese face culture, as well as whether face is still important in online interactions even though there is a physically invisible audience. Consequently, the findings reveal that while the students use both Renren and Facebook social media platforms, they are much more frequently and intensely engaged with the former. Although the two platforms are technically similar, the students present themselves in very different ways on the two sites. They are very mindful of using Chinese on Renren and English on Facebook. They share personal news, pictures of travel abroad, and pictures of a social nature on Facebook. However, fewer personal experiences are shared on Renren – pictures of travel usually only show mainland China, and there are minor everyday complaints or gossip, and a sharing of practical information.

The findings also show that although the other parties in online interactions may not be physically or immediately present, face-work is still essential. The strategies that the students use for face-work are based on their careful weighing of their own perceived relative status, and that of the other parties involved. Consideration of the nature of the relationship and the

relative status between the user and the perceived audiences determine the amount and type of information disclosed.

In the following, I will first discuss the background to how self-presentation is influenced by different others, why the culture of face is so important in the Chinese context, and how this is reflected when interacting on social media. I will then provide a brief introduction of the methodology used in my research of mainland Chinese students in universities in Hong Kong. I will consider the students' ideas on self-representation and their perceived audiences on both Facebook and Renren. Finally I will compare how these students present themselves differently on these two platforms.

### **Self-presentation and the culture of face online: a background**

It has been shown that the presence and response of others affect the formation of our self-images (Cooley, 1922; Mead, 1934). How we present ourselves largely relies on our definition of our audience and the degree of their involvement in our interactions (Goffman, 1959). Many factors contribute to how we perceive our audience, including the physical distance between the speakers, visible manners, audible tonal inflections and the socio-cultural background of the audience (e.g. Bell, 1984; Labov, 1966).

In face-to-face interactions, Goffman (1967) posited that one acts out a line, or a certain pattern of verbal and non-verbal expressions, that establishes one's identity and how one considers him/herself to relate to others who are present (p. 5). This in turn, affects "face", which Goffman defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for (her) himself by the line others assume (s) he has taken during a particular contact" (p. 5). Goffman (1967) therefore indicated that face is situationally defined by the immediate respect that one expects others to show in each specific social encounter. Face-work is calculated to avoid personal embarrassment and maintain self-respect.

The phenomenon of face is found in all societies, but academics have argued that face is more important in China due to its hierarchical structure of status inequality (Blau, Ruan & Ardel, 1991) and that the self is defined through relations with others (Chu, 1985; Fairbank, 1991). Although not restricted to East Asians, protecting social face is especially valued in Chinese society to promote interpersonal relationships (Bond & Lee, 1981; Brunner & Wang, 1988; Earley, 1997). It has been argued that Chinese people strongly emphasise interpersonal

harmony more than Westerners (Bond & Lee 1981; Ting-Toomey, 1988; Markus & Kitayama 1991) and place great importance on the maintaining of relationships. Chinese people are particularly motivated to protect the face of others and are equally concerned that their own face is accepted (Boisot & Child, 1996).

However, in doing so, Chinese individuals are expected to use different standards and different degrees of intimacy to interact with people (Fei, 1948; Hwang, 1987) because face gain or loss is related to the ingrained inequality in the Chinese hierarchical structure (Blau, Ruan & Ardel, 1991). For example, one must be obedient to superiors, considerate to friends, and authoritative to lower social status individuals. "In the context of Chinese culture, these principles are much more emphasised than elsewhere" (Hwang, 1987, p. 949). During social interaction, Chinese people therefore carefully consider the nature of the relationship to determine their appropriate moves. If they do not behave as expected, they may then lose face. Based on empirical research, Gao (1998) found that the need and concern for face and regard for the "other" have an important role in what, as well as how and why, something is communicated in a particular context among the Chinese. Indeed, the pursuit of gaining face and the avoidance of losing face have been generally recognised as priorities of the Chinese to gain respect in front of their peers; they do not only represent reputation and prestige, but they also have social value (Yang, 1945; Barbalet, 2014). Face-work is also therefore carried out with the goal to achieve social status or prestige (Hu, 1944).

Face can be confirmed or disconfirmed. The confirmation of face leads to a gain in social status and prestige, the latter, a loss of face or lower status. The mutual confirmation of social face is personally rewarding and strengthens relationships (Hwang, 1987). Disconfirmation of face as a resource loss might motivate individuals to withdraw from the relationship. People are expected to both prevent disconfirmation and make restitutions after they have suffered an affront to their face (Goffman, 1967).

The impact of social face is considered powerful and often used to explain findings such as the tendency of Asians to avoid conflict or open-minded discussion of diverse views (Kirkbride et al., 1991; Tse et al., 1994). However, little empirical work has directly studied social face, especially how the consideration of face influences self-presentation or interpersonal interaction. To fill this gap, this paper therefore examines how the

characteristics of interactional venues of social media and the Chinese face culture influence self-presentation on social media.

Social media is a compelling field site for studying interpersonal interactions and the presentation of self as much of these take place online, especially for youths (see Holmes & Choudhury, Chapter 8 in this volume). However, online settings have different technical affordances than conventional face-to-face interactions. Constraints are imposed that ultimately influence whom interactants perceive their audience to be, and also specify the meaning assigned to messages (Menchik & Tian, 2008). These constraints mean that the audience can be ambiguous, and social media users have a limited awareness of it.

Consequently, they may post content online that does not take their relationship with some of the readers into consideration which could cause problems during interpretation (Tian & Menchik, 2016). Also, interaction and presentation of the self on social media largely depends on text or pictures, which are more difficult to interpret meaning from as opposed to face-to-face interactions, since paralinguistic cues, gestures and body language are absent (Menchik & Tian, 2008). The audience is forced to rely on their own interpretations of the postings.

In considering the uniqueness of interaction in virtual encounters, I explore how technical settings influence self-presentation on social media in the Chinese context. In particular, I examine the interplay of technological affordances and the Chinese face culture, its influence on the way that users present themselves on social media, and the unintended consequences of their attempts at self-expression.

## **Study results**

### *Methodology*

To understand how the Chinese face culture influences self-presentation online, I conducted in-depth interviews in Mandarin Chinese with mainland undergraduates at three Hong Kong universities. Since 1997, mainland Chinese students have been permitted to enrol in Hong Kong universities. There were 11,376 mainland students enrolled in the academic year of 2013-2014, and the number continues to increase (UGC Statistics, 2016). I recruited 23 females and 19 males, 42 students in total, through a non-random quota sampling method.

I asked for basic demographic information as well as information on the use of different social media services, including social network composition and online activities. The

interviews provided details on how the students personified themselves online and why they chose that personification, and on their imagined audiences and how their perception of their audiences influenced the contents posted and posting style.

I also conducted online observations on both Renren and Facebook from March 2011 onwards<sup>1</sup>. I asked for permission to add the respondents as 'friends' so that I could observe their online activities on a daily basis, including the contents of their profile, messages, pictures, language used, etc. The interview data and online ethnographic information provided an understanding of both the online self-presentation style of the respondents in the broader context of the specific online platform as well as the underlying reasons for their online behaviour.

#### *Self-representation and perceived audiences*

Although the respondents used both Renren and Facebook, their engagement was very different with the two platforms. They spent much less time on the latter, and posted on the two SNSs with very different styles because the perceived audiences are different. They individualised themselves on Facebook, but focused on shared experiences on Renren. The students tended to use Facebook for contact with local Hong Kong or international students, and Renren with other mainland students:

*The Mainland students use both Facebook and Renren... and... don't use Facebook that often. Sometimes I add... local and international students, such as my classmates or hallmates. But since I'm not a committed Facebook user, I don't add too many people. (Case 8, male)*

Students also did not actively interact with local and international friends on their Facebook because they did not use the account very often:

*I use Facebook probably twice a month... use Renren more often, daily perhaps. If something comes up, I would post it on Renren and ask for help. I wouldn't use Facebook to do that. (Case 11, female)*

The audiences of the respondents on Renren were high school friends who were still in mainland China and other mainland students in Hong Kong, especially those who were attending the same university. High school friends were considered important, especially

those who were enrolled in different universities in mainland China, because many of the respondents still considered them as their reference group:

*Heard a girl complain that her high school roommate, who is not as good-looking and smart as her, is now interning at Goldman Sachs. Our parents also tell us these things; they like to compare us with other kids. (Case 31, male)*

Here, the student observed that mainland students in Hong Kong still think of their hometown peers as one of their important reference groups. This is because their parents in their hometowns would exchange recent updates about the students. Many of these students studying in Hong Kong and their parents believed that they were more privileged as they were pursuing an education at a Hong Kong university, or at least as elite as those enrolled in the top universities in China. Students in mainland universities also recognised this status differential, but were reluctant to admit it to their former classmates who were studying in Hong Kong because it disadvantaged them. This is because mainland students who wish to study in Hong Kong must also take the national college examination like other students who want to attend universities in mainland China, but are recruited through a special enrolment program. If accepted, they pay a much higher tuition fee of over HK\$ 140,000 (around US\$ 18,000) per year (Tian, 2016). Also, many Hong Kong institutions only use English for instruction, and the curriculum and school schedules are also quite different from those in mainland China.

The following student demonstrated this clear awareness of his relative status and the expectations of other people. Indeed, many were mindful of their audiences on Renren, and admit that their Renren postings were very different from their Facebook postings due to the different audiences:

*I know that I am more privileged than my high-school friends because I am in Hong Kong for university. But they think that our status is the same. So I have to be careful not to say anything that might look like I am showing off, so that I don't come across as snobby. (Case 25, male)*

The most obvious difference was the language used on the two sites – only simplified Chinese was used on Renren and English on Facebook. In the latter, this was due to their audience of international friends. When the respondents were further asked about why English was not used on Renren, they indicated that they did not want their hometown friends to feel that they

had changed after leaving for Hong Kong. They strived to ‘be equals’ with their hometown friends.

However, despite the fact that they may only have had a few international friends who couldn’t read Chinese on Facebook, and many other friends who were mainland or local Hong Kong students with the ability to read Chinese, they were still reluctant to use Chinese on Facebook because “it’s better to show that I have confidence in my English skills and feel comfortable posting in English” (Case 3, female). Facebook was therefore a place to demonstrate that their English skills were comparable to those of the local students.

The contents of their postings on Renren and Facebook were also quite different due to their careful consideration of their relationship with their imagined audiences and their relative status. Many consider Renren to be ‘Chinese’ so they followed Chinese cultural norms, for instance, they “do not shout private issues out loud”. Facebook is considered ‘Western’ so it was acceptable to be more upfront. In other words, Renren was a platform to express commonality for bonding purposes, but Facebook was a venue to compete and show off. This was better reflected in the contents of the postings, which will be discussed in the following sections.

### *Self-presentation online: a comparison*

#### Self-presentation on Renren

The student respondents were very sensitive to their different audiences and knew that others were viewing their postings<sup>ii</sup>. As their contacts on Renren were mainly mainland Chinese, they avoided using English and mentioning holidays or school breaks in Hong Kong because their mainland counterparts had different and usually fewer school breaks. They also avoided commenting about going abroad, securing an internship position, or obtaining a job offer. One of the student respondents elaborated:

*I use Renren to keep in touch with my old friends. I graduated from a Mainland high school, and now I’m here, so this is my way of connecting... I post... neutral things... nothing controversial. Say that I get a job offer, I wouldn’t post it on Renren... The Mainland has a competitive culture, so if we post anything that we do in Hong Kong or abroad, some people may be uncomfortable, and think that I’m just trying to show off. (Case 27, female)*



This respondent was aware that if she posted anything that reflected her privileged status in Hong Kong, she would be disconfirming the face of her hometown friends. Therefore, she was careful to ensure that her postings would not “upset” other people. Showing off is considered inappropriate or inconsiderate in the Chinese face culture because the face of other people is hurt when it is implied that they are less successful. When one hurts the face of other people, one’s own face is also lost. That is why the students were so concerned with whether they had upset other people.

Another student indicated that to maintain an “equal” status with his hometown friends, he avoided posting finance-related information:

*I’m a finance major and have always been interested in keeping track of this kind of information, but I won’t circulate it... on my Renren account... It’s not a good idea to have others think that I’m all about business, otherwise, they’re all going to avoid me. My high school classmates talk about games, TV dramas... So it’s not a good idea for me to discuss something that makes me seem pretentious... (Case 40, male)*

Similar to this respondent, many of other students also indicated that the safest topic of discussion was related to entertainment because there was no demonstration of privilege and therefore it would not affect nor disconfirm the face of others. Other ‘safe’ topics included complaints about daily life or gossip about relationships. These were considered safe because they presented a low-profile and unthreatening image of the user.

Renren was also a popular place to share various practical information with mainland students who sought advice related to their daily tasks and practical problems (e.g. visa applications); such advice was rarely found on Facebook. Also, Renren users were more likely to seek help and favours than those posting on Facebook, for example such as borrowing textbooks. This was also seen as effective – most of the time, someone lent assistance (Tian, 2016).

The students considered Renren “their own” (*ziji ren*) highly intimate community with contributing members. Most importantly, they felt they could use Renren and still take the feelings of other people into consideration, as well as confirm and avoid hurting the face of others, and, in so doing, gain face as well.

## Self-presentation on Facebook

In contrast, the student respondents did not consider Facebook as their own community because the perceived audiences were international *and* local Hong Kong students. While they tended to want to bond with other mainland students who were still studying in the mainland (i.e. their high school friends), and considered them as peers – albeit lower in status, although they avoided emphasising this superiority to give face to their mainland peers – they considered other international and local students who are also studying in Hong Kong as their competitors whom they desired to outperform. Therefore, Facebook was a place to flaunt and compete for attention or higher status, as expressed by the following female student:

*Facebook has too much stuff going on, such as postings of funny videos, vacation pictures that are photo-shopped, current news, and debates. A random posting won't get anyone's attention. It's kind of like a public bulletin board where everyone posts to show off and look their best. (Case 22, female)*

In contrast to Renren, Facebook was considered a good venue to broadcast personal news, for example, when the mainland students had a job offer or secured an internship position:

*My Facebook posts are different from my Renren posts. I would post about things that happened (to me) in Hong Kong or abroad. If I got a job offer or secured an internship position... go abroad for an exchange program... I would post on Facebook but rarely or not on Renren. (Case 19, male)*

Travel pictures are an interesting type of posts because while the students would post them on both SNSs, they tended to post domestic travel on Renren and international travel on Facebook:

*I definitely update my Facebook more often when I go overseas. Like for an exchange program or a vacation abroad. But I usually don't post overseas travel pictures on Renren. The first time I went overseas, I posted quite a lot on Renren, because I was a newbie then... But... my posting caused conflict between me and some of my old friends (in Mainland China), (so) I stopped doing that... My friends on Renren... share pictures of their travel around China. If I go to Xinjiang province, I'll post those pictures on Renren, because others (who are studying in Mainland China) can afford to go there too. (Case 2, male)*

In general, mainland students who are studying in Hong Kong have more opportunities to travel abroad in various programs, and it is also easier for them to obtain visas. This student

indicated that he changed his posting contents on Renren after they aroused conflict. However, international and local students commonly travel around the world and post pictures on Facebook. Therefore, the mainland students in Hong Kong also take part in this practice to show that they are equally global and well-travelled, perhaps to counteract the usual impression that mainland Chinese students have minimal opportunities to travel abroad.

The presentation of the self in front of international and especially local Hong Kong students has further increased in complication given the current political climate in Hong Kong. In recent years, the Hong Kong–mainland conflicts have led to discrimination towards the mainland Chinese in Hong Kong. Indeed, nearly 17 years after the reunification of Hong Kong with China, tension between the two continue to mount (Tharoor, 2014; Lai, 2012). Such tensions can be seen in the anti-national education movement (Ko, 2012), protests against mainland tourists who visit Hong Kong to shop (Shadbolt, 2014), and the social media fuelled controversies around a mainland child being allowed to urinate in Hong Kong streets (Tharoor, 2014). These incidents have attracted wide media coverage and online discussions in Hong Kong (Adorjan & Yau, 2015). Related to the increasing tensions is the identity issue. In recent years, more Hong Kongers recognise themselves first and foremost as Hong Kong citizens instead of Chinese (Ko, 2012). Some hold negative stereotypes of the mainland Chinese. As a result, the latter have been accused of violating social rules in Hong Kong (Chow, 2012), and some mainland Chinese tourists have encountered discrimination because of language and social norm differences (Ye et al., 2013).

Mainland students who study in Hong Kong are situated within this context of conflicts. Although attitudes may greatly vary at the individual level, the respondents tended to have different viewpoints on the various events related to Hong Kong–mainland conflicts. This is why some also shared particular information on China on their Facebook account to counter the negative opinions of local youth in China and the mainland Chinese in general:

*I mainly share information on China on Facebook, because I mainly use it to connect with local and international students... I might post an article from the Financial Times on China so that they have more information.... if I read something that would create misunderstandings about China, I will post... on my Facebook page and correct the information. For example, I saw a picture of a Chinese antique that was mistaken by foreigners for a cup and they used it for drinking. But it is actually used for spitting out*

*phlegm... I posted this on Facebook... it's my responsibility to show them things that they do not know about China. (Case 5, male)*

The student quoted above felt that he was providing knowledge and demonstrating diligence. Many of the other respondents also indicated that their Facebook account served this purpose. To further counter the discrimination in Hong Kong, many of the respondents also admitted that they have flaunted their achievements on Facebook, such as academic performance, successful internships, or penchant for high culture or fashionable items and sometimes even for luxury (such as staying in five-star hotels), to show that they were well-off, hard-working, open-minded, and academically inclined. Their intentions were to demonstrate superiority to the local students, and gain status and face in the context of discrimination against the mainland Chinese in Hong Kong.

In summary, online self-presentation is closely related to the perceived audiences. The student respondents are modest and low profile individuals on Renren as the main audiences are hometown friends and other mainland students in Hong Kong. They attempt to conform and avoid being seen as competitive or overly serious, and also downplay their privileged status so as to avoid harming the face of their hometown friends. However, their perceived audiences on Facebook are international and local students, and consequently, the opposite is true.

## **Conclusion**

I have shown here that students present themselves in very different ways on Renren and Facebook due to differences between the two imagined audiences. Although the other parties of the interaction may not be physically or immediately present, considerations of face are still essential in determining the style and content of their postings. The strategies on self-presentation are based on careful determination of perceived relative status – both their own and that of the other parties involved – because even though the latter may not be physically or immediately present on the social media, face-work is still essential.

Due to this evaluation of relationships, the relative status of others, and avoidance of disconfirmation of face, Renren users rarely post items that underline privilege and status; consequently, trivial daily life updates, complaints, domestic travel photos and practical information dominate the postings. Anything more would be inconsiderate of the feelings of

others and arouse controversy. However, the opposite is true on Facebook. Additionally, many have found that the best way to maintain or gain face on Renren is a low profile and alignment of emotions and actions. Conversely, the best strategy on Facebook is a relatively high profile to compete with their international counterparts.

Although this study focuses empirically on mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong, the research findings on the importance of the perceived audience on social media, as well as how people present themselves differently on different online platforms, can be also applied to other forms of online interactions. When people present themselves online, their perception of the potential audience, and evaluation of their relationship and relative status with them, still have key importance. That is why they present themselves in very different ways on the two technically similar platforms. Based on this line of thinking, on online platforms with a wider and more anonymous audience (such as Twitter and Weibo) or those more closed networks (such as WeChat), we might expect users to behave in different ways.

This research affirms the resilience of cultural influence on inter-personal interactions, even online, where people often interact with undetectable others. The Chinese face culture, that is the emphasis placed on gaining face and confirming the face of others, extends to the online sphere. Yet because social media offers a wider and less predictable arena for face-work, the consequences of misjudgment are different from those of face-to-face interaction, in which all interactants immediately feel the embarrassment caused by the loss of face. On social media, for example, sometimes it takes time for the user to realise that s/he has posted information that has led to the loss of face. Whether social media has any reverse impacts on the face culture can be the direction of future research.

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<sup>i</sup> Since 2013, Renren has been largely replaced by WeChat. However, the data in this chapter were collected during 2011-2012 as at that time, Renren was still the dominating social media for Chinese students. Now, even though students prefer WeChat, the self-presentation strategies are very similar, at least as shown in my recent study on its use. Therefore, the theoretical argument that I have made in this chapter still holds.

<sup>ii</sup> Both male and female mainland Chinese students in different majors and from different hometowns tend to act in very similar ways on Renren and Facebook. This is probably because the mainland Chinese students who are

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studying in Hong Kong are a highly homogeneous group in terms of social class background and orientation (Tian, 2016).