

# Not Losing Your Face: The Influence of Face Culture on Chinese Tourist Behavior

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## Abstract

"Face", is commonly recognised as one of the most salient social characteristics of being Chinese and is an important socially shared concept to normalise Chinese behaviour. Face is an important symbol for the Chinese to maintain relationship and reputation, and it has also become an important factor influencing tourist behavior. The desire for face and the fear of losing face have a dual impact on tourists' consumption behavior, Self-disclosure behavior, and uncivilized behavior. Identity as an intermediary connects the face culture with tourist behavior, and is the key mechanism of this impact. Understanding the role of face in tourist behavior is an inevitable choice for constructing a healthy tourism culture and guiding tourists to rational behavior.

## Keywords

Face; Face Culture; Tourist Behavior; Identity.

## 1. Introduction

In the process of tourism, "people" are the source of various tourism phenomena and the most important subject in tourism research [1]. Role theory believes that people are the product of society, and their attitudes and behaviors are affected by their role status in society and expectations of social roles [2]. In other words, Cultural background is one of the important factors influencing people's behavior. Therefore, understanding people in a specific cultural background is an important way to explore tourist behavior.

In China, Confucianism based on interpersonal relationship has long occupied a dominant position in traditional Chinese culture and has a profound impact on people's behavior. People who pay attention to interpersonal relationships also have a stronger sense of face and care more about the views of others and society [3]. Therefore, in the Chinese context, face is an important structural concept and psychological feature that runs through people's daily lives and is woven. In addition, face is also the most subtle norm in Chinese social interactions. Face acts as an important norm that most Chinese people follow, consciously or unconsciously, when they are interacting with others[4]. It is a key concept for understanding Chinese mind and behaviour [5].

Thought the influence of Chinese cultural values on tourist behaviour has been well acknowledged, research on the impact of Chinese cultural values, especially the concept of face on tourist behaviour is still limited[4]. Based on previous research, this study focuses on the impact of face culture on tourism consumption behaviors, Self-disclosure behaviors, and uncivilized behaviors, and studies the influence mechanism of identity in it, aiming to better understand how face culture influence behaviours in a tourism context and provide some suggestions for the development of Chinses tourism.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Face and Face Culture

It is generally believed that the concept of face originates from Chinese Confucianism with well-known Chinese manifestations[6]. However, it is also a universal socio-cultural phenomenon, addressed by terms such as "politeness", "preservation of self", and "deference and demeanour"[7,8,9]. In fact, the issue of face has always been one of the key topics of concern and research by linguists, sociologists, and psychologists. Regarding "face", sociologist Owen Goffman believes that it should be understood from two dimensions: front-end effect and back-end psychology [10]; in other words, face not only includes the positive social image that every social public strives for for themselves, but also the self-perception of the individual to this positive social image. According to this view, American linguists and psychologists Brown and Levinson put forward the face theory based on the polite framework, and put forward the concept of positive face and negative face. Positive face refers to the need that certain aspects of self-worth can be recognized or approved by related people; negative face refers to the need for capable adults to not be hindered or forced by others in their actions [11], this understanding has a certain Western Subjectivism in culture. In the field of sociolinguistic research, scholars generally define face as "the mutual and collaborative public intentions given by participants in a communicative event" [12]. Zhu Ruiling divides face into social face and self face. The former refers to those that meet the requirements of external society, including personal status, political rights, academic achievements, etc.; the latter refers to self-demand, mainly personal internalized moral behavior [13]. Generally speaking, scholars mainly understand the conception of "face" from two perspectives, namely, external performance and internal perception. The concept of face has been used in understanding individual's social value and status [14]. Therefore, we can define "face" as: "face" is an individual's identity psychology and behavior after impression decoration in order to cater to a certain social circle's identity [15].

Chinese people attach great importance to the external social situation and social reality, and are very concerned about the opinions of others, which is why face plays an important role in daily life of Chinese[16]. Although this contrary to their own wishes, Chinese expect to meet the characteristics and requirements of the social situation to cater to the outside world. The face types of Chinese mainly include moral face, status face, talent face and interpersonal relationship face. Zuo Bin concluded that the four types of behaviors that Chinese people consider shameless are: moral violation, privacy exposure, ability defects and bad habits [17].

In order to save face, people take actions to give face, fight for face and preserve face, exchange face etc, which have gradually formed a "face" culture [18].

Face in tourism research has gained attention due to rapid expansion of East Asian tourism and increasing recognition of tourism as an experiential and interactive phenomenon that requires understanding of associated indigenous perspectives[6]. Face is used to explain tourist experience and behavior. For example, face can influence gift purchase behaviour and the tendency to share experiences on social media[4,19]. Different from the Westernized form of "smiling service", Chinese culture emphasizes "face" in travel, which can be obtained, saved, regained or lost face in travel interactions, and ultimately sometimes even profoundly affect the travel experience[6].

### 2.2. Identity

The word "identity" originated from the Latin *idem* (ie , the same). Regarding the meaning of the word "identity", it has two meanings. First, identity, that is, the same or the same between A and B. Second, uniqueness, which is manifested in the consistency and continuity embodied in the time span [20]. It can be seen from this that "identity" reveals the relationship between

"similarity" and "difference". Identity means that an individual defines himself as a member of a certain group. The essence of identity is not only "psychological", but also includes the concept of "group". It is a self-extension of the individual and regards oneself as a group member. Such self-definition and belonging is one of the important foundations for the formation of individual groups and social attitudes, and it takes a long time to form. At the same time, identification illustrates the attachment of individual psychology, because there is a long-term attitude and group orientation, which is the self-identification of a certain group, and the long-term commitment to a certain group is an important manifestation of identification [21].

Tajfel argues that although individuals might behave in distinctive ways, common intragroup behaviour connects individuals with the social structure in which they live [22]. Hence, identity concepts are particularly useful to understand behaviour in the tourism context.

### **2.3. Tourist Behavior**

Tourist behavior, as an interdisciplinary research content of management, psychology, and sociology, has attracted attention. Psychologists believe that behavior is the reaction process of individuals or groups to stimuli [23], which is mainly manifested as implicit behavior and explicit behavior. In the field of marketing research, consumer behavior is defined as "the dynamic process of the interaction of emotion, cognition, behavior, and various environmental factors when humans exchange various aspects of life" [24]. Researchers have deepened the study on tourists' purchasing behavior and post-travel behavior, focusing on empirical research on tourists' purchasing behavior preferences, perceived value, satisfaction, regret and loyalty [1]. Xie and Xu explained the interactive rituals in the tourist field based on the emotional energy of the travel experience; Wu and Tang introduced the embodied theory into the study of travel experience, arguing that the body, perception, and situation are related to travel experience; Zhao explored the meaning of tourist experience from the perspective of anthropology [25,26,27].

A few studies have explored the influence of face culture on tourist behavior. For example, self-face concern positively affected Chinese tourists' gift selection effort, brand orientation, and purchase cost and can promote pro-environmental behavior [3,4]. However, these studies only focus on a specific field.

It is believed that the protection of one's face has an impact on tourists' behavior. For example, Jin argues that the notion of shame which accompanies losing face influences all Chinese behaviour. It is the desire to protect face that motivates individuals to behave according to the social norm [3,28]. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the mechanism by which face affects tourist behavior.

## **3. Face Culture and Tourist Behavior**

### **3.1. The Influence of Face Culture on Chinese Tourists Behavior**

The behavior of tourists will be for certain social purposes, one of which may be the need for face. This need contains two dimensions: the desire for face and the fear of losing face [29,30]. The desire for face reflects people's desire to improve their social image and status, while fear of losing face indicates that people tend to maintain the status quo and maintain the existing "face". This complicated face culture profoundly affects the behavior of tourists. Therefore, the following article will discuss the influence of face culture on consumer behavior and self-disclosure behavior, and pay attention to a special kind of behavior, that is, tourists' unethical behavior.

#### **3.1.1. Consumption Behavior**

In the context of consumption, tourists think that the products and services they purchase are their self-extension, so that they can use their value to make social comparisons and show their

own face based on the results of the comparison. Tourists' consumption behavior is composed of two parts: the purchasing decision process and the purchasing practice process. Generally speaking, there are three psychological processes of tourist decision-making: the generation of tourism demand, the formation of tourism motivation, and the formation of decision-making [31]. The motivation of status and prestige, that is, the pursuit of face is one of the basic motivations for people to travel, which in turn affects their purchasing behavior. This effect is twofold, and it will both promote and inhibit consumption [32].

On the one hand, out of the desire for face, tourists will affirm the purchase decision and carry out purchase practice in order to promote their social image and status. This influence manifests itself in four forms.

First, conspicuous consumption. Some tourists will show off their identity, wealth and status by buying products that exceed those of other tourists. Such as staying in the presidential suites of luxury hotels, taking luxury cruise ships, or even spending on luxury and hedonistic tourism. Many tourists may have advanced consumption. For them, conspicuous consumption is a means of earning face for themselves.

Second, follow the trend of consumption. Follow-up consumption refers to consumption that follows social trends, standards, and trends. In the field of tourism, it is manifested as chasing popular attractions and passive tourism consumption. For example, rural residents prefer popular cities such as Beijing and Shanghai in the choice of tourist destinations; many young people follow the trend and join the "poor travel" group [33,34,35]. For the sake of "face", they would rather endure the travel environment of congested traffic, tight accommodation, and rising tickets, to sacrifice the quality of tourism. Tourists who consume passively usually have no willingness to travel. They are either encouraged or follow the trend and have to consume for the sake of "face".

Third, fashion consumption. As tourism has gradually become a way of life for people, many tourists have begun to regard this consumption as a sign of fashion, and are willing to try some novel forms of tourism, such as golf tours, parachuting tours and so on. Use this form to show their unique taste and improve their face.

Fourth, blind consumption. Some tourists do not consider income restrictions or practicality and carry out some irrational consumer behaviors, such as buying famous brand products and luxury goods abroad, in order to show their identity and face.

On the other hand, when tourists make social comparisons with others through tourism consumption to improve their personal status and satisfy their face, out of the demand for social uniqueness, tourists will deny purchasing decisions and inhibit purchasing practices [36]. For example, some tourists will refuse to choose popular attractions as tourist destinations in order to show their unique personality.

### **3.1.2. Self-disclosure Behavior**

Self-disclosure refers to when individuals voluntarily show their behavior and confide their thoughts in front of others when interacting with others [37]. It is a kind of information transmission behavior, the purpose is to let the target person (the person with whom the personal information is communicated) understand the information about themselves. With the development of social media, Self-disclosure has become an important part of people's use of the Internet. Traditional face-to-face disclosure has also shifted more to the Internet. Tourists share their travel experiences with friends and even strangers on social media.

Self-disclosure has a very important social function [38]. An individual who never reveals his own information to important others cannot get feedback from others, and those who do not reveal cannot fully let others know and understand themselves. Although there are certain information leakage and other problems, based on cost-benefit analysis, the benefits of Self-disclosure are sometimes far greater than information leakage [39]. Through Self-disclosure,

tourists can obtain social capital and thus earn face for tourists. Because while tourists share their experiences, thoughts, attitudes and feelings with each other, the target person will have views on the social identity and status of the tourists. One of the motivations of Internet users for Self-disclosure is to manage impressions through self-presentation in order to obtain a good face image [40]. It can be seen that the face culture can promote the Self-disclosure behavior of tourists.

In terms of the content of Self-disclosure, DeVito divides Self-disclosure into positive Self-disclosure and negative Self-disclosure according to the nature of Self-disclosure content [41]. Positive Self-disclosure refers to the sharing of positive content, while negative Self-disclosure is the opposite, pointing to unpleasant, negative experiences, emotions, and so on. Those with positive Self-disclosure will be more attractive to the target person, and negative Self-disclosure may lead to deterioration of the image. Out of the love of face, tourists generally make positive Self-disclosure and share their personal positive journey experiences and feelings; at the same time, they hide negative Self-disclosure, trying to conceal or unwilling to reveal what they have encountered during the journey. Tourists try to hide the trouble or their own uncivilized behavior, so as not to have a negative impact on their own face. The former, for example, many tourists will post on social media the beauty and food of the tourist destination to create an image of their exquisite and love life, while the latter, such as some tourists will be out of the "family ugliness", that is, the psychology of loving face, ignore the bad things that they have encountered in the journey, and only publishes the good journey experience on social media.

### 3.1.3. Uncivilized Behavior

Tourist uncivilized behavior refers to the behavior of tourists deviating from or violating ethical norms [42]. The typical manifestation of this uncivilized behavior is that some tourists spit, take photos at will, paint on cultural relics at will, throw rubbish, talk loudly in public places, stand in the way in parallel, queue or jump in line when participating in domestic and foreign tourism activities.

Since tourism activities are carried out by tourists leaving their place of residence, leaving their daily life and working environment, this means that daily ethics may lose their effect on their behavior and can only rely on their self-consciousness. And this consciousness is often strengthened by the influence of face culture. Face represents the most basic dignity of tourists. Losing face means the loss of their basic social dignity [43]. In the etiquette norms of Chinese culture, this is a situation that tourists cannot accept. Therefore, the shame concept brought about by losing face affects the behavior of tourists, and the desire to protect face prompts tourists to act in accordance with social norms and avoid the occurrence of unethical behaviors. The study by Tolkach et al. confirmed this. They found that although tourists are more likely to engage in uncivilized behaviors on vacation in Europe than that in China, some mainland Chinese tourists seem to have a large degree of restraint and self-control in Hongkong, because the value of face is played in it [44]. Similarly, as tourists who implement pro-environmental behaviors can better reflect their own literacy and project a good image to the society and others, tourists with a high sense of face are more inclined to protect the environment and avoid environmental damage.

## 3.2. The Influence Mechanism of Face Culture

Identity is the internalization of the values, standards, expectations and social roles of others or groups in individual behavior and self-concept [45]. In a sense, it is people's acceptance of their own status, image and role in society, and the nature of their relationship with others. The formation of identity is not entirely a natural process. It requires selection, maintenance, creation, and management. More specifically, good and positive identities need to be maintained, expressed and unfavorable identities need to be avoided, concealed, or resisted.



People must actively create favorable identifications. At the same time, people must actively prevent identity from being damaged. In short, identity requires constant management. The management of identity is not a passive process, but an active selection and creation process. At the same time, identity management follows certain cultural and social rules and orders[21]. Face culture affects the behavior of tourists in all aspects, and it works through identity. For example, Chinese people usually think of themselves as descendants of dragons, which makes them a distinct identity based on ethnic characteristics. This kind of recognition will prompt Chinese tourists to regulate their behavior when traveling abroad to avoid losing the "collective face" of the Chinese.

"Face" and "identity" are closely related. "Face" is a desire and pursuit of "identity", and "identity" is an interest pursued by "face". The essence of face is an ideal state that an individual expects to achieve or maintain in social activities, which is affirmed and respected by others, and its mechanism is identity management. The focus of tourist identity management lies in the external and objective aspects of identity, such as by means of a certain consumption pattern or behavior, to be objectively identified. Therefore, specific tourism consumption behaviors, Self-disclosure behaviors, and avoidance of uncivilized behaviors have become a means of being recognized and transformed into face.

## 4. Conclusion and Discussion

### 4.1. Conclusion

Face culture has an important influence on the behavior of tourists. In terms of negative effects, the behavior of tourists based on "face" has caused additional economic and psychological burdens on tourists and suppressed the real needs of tourists. Irrational tourism consumption can easily lead to the overload of destination tourism facilities and even the destruction of resources. Excessive Self-disclosure brings a high risk of information leakage.

On the other hand, just as face can stimulate people's self-development behaviors such as being positive, improving their own qualities and abilities, face culture also has a stimulating effect on tourists. Face culture can stimulate the generation of new tourism consumption demand, and then promote the innovation and development of tourism to a certain extent. It restrains tourists' uncivilized behaviors, and objectively improves individual tourism civilized behaviors to move closer to public tourism ethics, and has a positive effect on the construction of tourism ethics.

In short, face culture is a double-edged sword. It has become an inevitable choice to make efforts to play the positive role of face culture and guide tourists to conduct civilized, healthy and rational tourism activities.

### 4.2. Discussion

It is not wrong for tourists to love face, because face can be regarded as a symbol of civilization to a certain extent. It is a kind of maintenance of people's own image and a behavioral manifestation of shame. It is also a force of self-restraint and motivation. But if they love face too much, the positive meaning of "face" itself will be distorted. The face culture interacts with the behavior of tourists and continues to develop in social changes, making it possible to weaken and transform the negative face culture. The continuity, stability and long-term nature of culture and history make the renewal of face culture and the transformation of traditional tourism behavior need a gradual process. For this reason, it is necessary to correctly understand the influence of face culture on the behavior of tourists and play its positive role in order to guide the healthy development of tourism.

Some limitations of current research should be acknowledged, and some future research directions should be briefly explained. In the Chinese context, face includes two meanings: *lian*

and Mianzi. The subtle differences between the two have not been discussed in depth in this study. In addition, studies have shown that factors such as age and education level affect the influence of face culture on tourists' behavior. Future research can further explore these issues.

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