Doctoral Thesis

'Face'-related Expressions in the Minnan Dialect of Chinese – A Pragmatic-based Study

Jiejun Chen

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Summary of Research Background, Working Definition and Research Questions

In this thesis, I investigate the use of 'face'-related expressions in the Minnan Dialect of Chinese. Minnan is often referred to as a 'conservative' dialect because of its large inventory of archaic and local expressions, including a rich variety of 'face'-related expressions. To date little research has been dedicated to this 'face'-related inventory in Minnan, supposedly because it is often assumed that 'face' is a homogeneous notion in Chinese. In this thesis, I critically revisit this assumption.

Research Background

Interest in Chinese 'face' emerged as early as in the early 20th century with two literary pieces written by Lu Xun (1934) and Lin Yu-Tang (1936), both of whom defined 'face' as a cultural 'heritage' of China playing an important role in preserving Chinese nation (see Pan & Kádár, 2011; Kádár & Pan, 2012). This culture-specific and ethnocentric view of Chinese 'face' was further highlighted by Hu (1944), who argued that Chinese 'face' is manifested as *mian(-zi)* and *lian*; the former *mian(-zi)* refers to someone's less important ('front/light') 'face' which can be safely threatened and lost, while the later *lian* refers to someone's more important ('back/heavy') 'face' which can never be threatened or lost without a major breakdown of an interpersonal relationship. As Pan and Kádár (2011) pointed out, Hu's research represented Chinese 'face' as a culturally exotic and homogeneous notion, which distinguishes the Chinese nation from other nations. Later, Goffman's (1955) research moved away from attributing face to the Chinese linguaculture only. Based on Hu's (1944) and Goffman's (1955) discussion of 'face', the influential interpretation of negative/positive 'face' from Brown and Levison (1978, 1987) gave birth to a vast of cultural-specific discussions for its inclination to universality, especially in Chinese. Many scholars were devoted to distinguishing Chinese 'face' as a native metapragmatic notion from academic definitions of 'face' (see Gu, 1990, p. 237; Mao, 1994; Hinze, 2005, p. 171; Qi, 2011, p. 280). In such research on Chinese, it has generally been assumed that Chinese is a 'face-rich' linguaculture – unlike other linguacultures – and that Chinese 'face' is a homogeneous entity. This study challenges this view.

Through this challenge, I contribute to a body of studies which has criticised the assumption that 'face' expressions are only important in Chinese. For example, Matsumoto (1988) and Hiraga and Turner (1996) argued that Japanese also has a rich inventory of 'face'-related expressions, and Ruhi and Işık-Güler (2007) found the same about Turkish. The contrastive pragmatic research of Ruhi and Kádár (2011) revealed that Chinese and Turkish 'face'-related expressions are in fact comparable. Haugh and Hinze (2003, p.2) compared Chinese and English speakers' evaluations of 'face' phenomena, arguing that the face-related evaluations of their subjects are comparable. Yu (2003, p. 1704) pointed out that Chinese and English have various "general shared concepts" of 'face'. Along with such contrastive research, another group of scholars has challenged the concept that 'face' is homogeneous in Chinese, influencing the politeness behaviour of speakers of any dialect of Chinese. This is another body of research with which I align myself. For example, Chen (2001, p. 94) drew attention to the fact that there is significant variation as regards how speakers of Chinese interpret 'face'-related expressions. The studies of He (2012) and Zhang (2021) showed that different generations of Chinese speakers greatly varied in their perception of 'facework' and 'face'-related expressions. Long and Aziz's (2022) research finds a significant gender difference in the impact of "face" on the willingness to travel abroad.

Notwithstanding the importance of such inquiries into Chinese 'face', scholars have usually uncritically accepted the validity of Hu's (1944) early typology, which divides Chinese 'face' into *mian(-zi)* and *lian.* For example, Yu (2001) and Jin (2006) have attempted to reinterpret the concepts *mian(-zi)* and *lian* by assuming that these 'face'-related lexemes are used in a dual way in the Chinese sociocultural context in general. Also, a number of studies used *mian(-zi)* and *lian* as a *tertium comparationis* to describe and compare different types of Chinese facework (see e.g. Mao, 1994; He & Zhang, 2011; Hinze, 2012; Zhou & Zhang, 2017; Kinnison, 2017; Li, 2020; Chen et al., 2021). The Mandarin-based *mian(-zi)* and *lian* dichotomy even appeared in pragmatic research on facework in major dialects such as Cantonese (King & Myers, 1977; Jin, 2006; Pan, 2011; Chan et al., 2018) and Minnan (Su, 2009; Chang & Haugh, 2011; Su & Lee, 2022). This lack of academic awareness of dialectal variation between 'face'-related expressions is surprising because metapragmatic inventories tend to vary across Chinese dialects (see Yin 2009), and it shows how strongly the *mian–lian* dichotomy influenced the

study of Chinese language use. The same applies to historical research on Chinese 'face', such as Yin (2009) and Zhu (2013) where scholars mostly zeroed in on the *mian–lian* dichotomy.

While *mian(-zi)* and *lian* in dichotomy are no doubt important, a key problem that has been ignored in previous research is that both *mian(-zi)* and *lian* are Mandarin expressions. Relying on a dichotomy created on the basis of such Mandarin 'face'-related expressions in the study of dialectal language use may be problematic if one considers that speakers of Chinese dialects often struggle to explain linguacultural phenomena such as 'face' and 'politeness' by using Mandarin (Zheng, 2019, p. 58). To the best of my knowledge, only King and Myers (1977) and Jin (2006) argued that *mian(-zi)* and *lian* might not be fully applicable to study 'face'-related expressions in Chinese dialects, pointing out that the monosyllabic *mian* (rather than the polysyllabic *mian-zi*) is more important in Chinese dialects than either *lian* or *mian(-zi)*. Yet, neither King and Myers (1977) nor Jin (2006) discussed Chinese dialectal 'face'-related expressions in much detail. This study aims to fulfil this gap by considering whether one of the generally assumed characteristics of Chinese 'face' – the dichotomy of *mian* and *lian*, also applies to the Minnan Dialect. Since in previous research, *lian* has been presented as a superordinate notion which, unlike *mian(-zi)*, must be preserved at any cost, in the current research I devote special attention to the question as to whether this higher-lower-order relationship between *lian* and *mian(-zi)* also holds for the use of 'face' in the Minnan Dialect.

A related issue in Chinese pragmatic research has been that many scholars assumed that the *only* 'face'-related expressions are *mian* and *lian* in Chinese (see e.g., Yu, 2001; Haugh & Hinze, 2003; Hinze, 2005; Zhou & Zhang, 2017). While in their historical pragmatic study, Kádár and Pan (2012, p. 3) pointed out that there are actually three lexemes for 'face' in Chinese, including *lian*, *mian* and *yan* 顔; they argued that *yan* always describes one's physical face, i.e. not 'face' in an abstract sense. Zhai (1999, 2021a) even pointed out that Chinese "*qì* 气" (air), "*guāng* 光" (light), "*chǒu* 丑" (ugly), "*rén* 人" (human), "*chǐ* 耻" (shame) and their related collocations are often 'face'-related. However, such expressions are long ignored in 'face' research as their lack of linguistic components of face. With special attention to such expressions in this study, I take a bottom–up approach and look at my data with the cold eye of the linguist without assuming that Chinese 'face'-related expressions consist of the *mian–lian* dichotomy only, and even, idioms including 'face' only.

Working Definition

Without assuming that Chinese 'face'-related expressions consist of the *mian–lian* dichotomy only, and even, idioms including 'face' only, in this study I define 'face'-related expressions as linguistic expressions which indicate the constructive or destructive effects on one's 'face', instead of merely restricting them within the scope of those idiomatic collocations which include face.

In addition, I distinguished what I defined as '*core (nominal) 'face' expressions*' from collocations in which these core expressions are used. This is because nominal 'face' expressions can co-occur with different verbs/adjectives/pronouns in Chinese. For example, *mian* or *lian* is the core 'face' expression. The collocations in the forms of "verb/adjective/pronouns + core 'face' expressions" or core 'face' expressions + verb/adjective/pronouns" are thus referred to as *'face'-related expressions*.

Research Questions

This study consists of three parts, which are presented in the thesis in three chapters (Chapter 4 – Chapter 6), aiming at three interrelated questions:

1. Whether the higher-lower-order relationship between *lian* and *mian(-zi)* also holds for the use of 'face' in the Minnan Dialect (Chapter 4)?
2. Whether such dialectal Chinese 'face'-related expressions in Minnan are readily interpretable in a written form for speakers of other dialects (Chapter 5)?
3. Whether the duality of 'face' *mian* and *lian* in Mandarin and the singularity *mian* in Minnan[1] apply to Chinese historical data (Chapter 6)?

By pursuing these questions, I intend to critically investigate the long-held assumption that Chinese 'face' is somehow a 'homogeneous' notion, which can be used to explain any

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[1] As the result of Chapter 4 will show, while there is a duality *mian* and *lian* in Mandarin, there is only a singularity *mian* in the Minnan Dialect.

conversation in any dialect of Chinese in any period. If this assumption holds, it is valid to assume that 'Chinese face' *per se* exists. However, if it turns out to be difficult to uphold this assumption, we need to take a new stance on Chinese 'face', arguing that Minnan and maybe other Chinese dialects as well have their own local repertoires of 'face'-related expressions. Such repertoires may not be entirely different from Mandarin (and from each other). Yet, in approaching such repertoires, one should not set out from the *a priori* assumption that they can be captured and interpreted entirely on the basis of Mandarin.

The Structure of the Thesis

This thesis consists of seven chapters. In Chapter 1, I provide an introduction to the thesis. I present the research background of this study, stating the knowledge gap which I aim to fulfil. I then list the research questions of this research project. I also clarify the use of terminology in this research, followed by an outline of the structure of this thesis.

In Chapter 2, I start with a brief introduction to the history of the Minnan Dialect. Then I discuss the conceptualisation of 'face' and review the relevant literature on three widely discussed issues in 'face' research: 1) the universality versus the culture-specificity of 'face'; 2) the first-order/emic and the second-order/etic perspectives of viewing 'face'; 3) study 'face' within Politeness versus study 'face' as its own. In the fourth section of this chapter, I discuss research on Chinese 'face' including 1) those studies that assume Chinese 'face' as a homogeneous concept and 2) those looking into the variation of 'face' in China. Lastly, I review relevant studies on 'face'-related expressions and then provide a working definition of 'face'-related expressions.

In Chapter 3, I only outline my methodology and data used in this study, explaining and justifying the methodological choices and design and how they match each research question. The detailed information will be presented in Chapters 4 – 6 respectively.

Chapter 4 is devoted to answer my first research question: whether the higher-lower-order relationship between *lian* and *mian(-zi)* also holds for the use of 'face' in the Minnan Dialect.

I collected Minnan 'face'-related expressions with the aid of multiple types of data. Altogether there were 209 occurrences of 'face'-related expressions in my various data types,

consisting of 80 different 'face'-related expressions. These 80 'face'-related collocations, belonging to altogether 12 core 'face' expressions, consisted of both Verb/Adjective/Pronoun + 'face' and 'face' + Verb/Adjective/Pronoun polysyllabic structures (i.e., nominal 'face'-related expressions collocating with a verb, an adjective or a pronoun). By categorising these 'face'-related expressions, a surprising outcome has been that *lián* (*lian* in Minnan) is remarkedly underrepresented in the data with only one example, while *mian*-related expressions occur to be heavily dominant: altogether 11 *mian*-related core expressions of 'face' were identified involving 79 verb/adjective/pronoun-collocating forms with 208 occurrences. This finding shows that *lian* is definitely *less* important than *mian* in Minnan: the fact that only 1 *lian*-related expression occurred among the 80 'face'-related expressions in my corpora, and also that all the Minnan-speaking respondents in my study did not encounter this expression shows that *lian* is not a frequently used Minnan expression. Also, by analysing the use of *mian*-related expressions in Minnan, I found that the higher-lower-relationship between *lian* and *mian* is inapplicable in Minnan as *mian* in Minnan can refer to both the 'front/light' unimportant 'face' and the 'back/heavy' important 'face'.

As a follow-up of this study, I also studied Minnan 'face'-related expressions without 'face' nominal expressions. I first identified 4 such expressions in a Minnan TV series and then conduct a bipartite test to a group of bilinguals of Minnan and Mandarin to investigate whether the 'face'-relatedness of these expressions could be realised by the speakers when without and with contexts. The results show that 3 of the understudied Minnan expressions are idiomatically used as 'face'-related expressions as their 'face'-relatedness could be freely recognised by the speakers both within and without contextual information, while the other one expression is somewhat 'ad hoc' 'face'-related expression as it was only related to 'face' in specific contexts.

In Chapter 5, I target the second research question: whether the collected dialectal Chinese 'face'-related expressions in Minnan are readily interpretable in a written form for speakers of other dialects. I set out from the hypothesis that Minnan 'face'-related expressions are interpretable for any Chinese speaker because Mandarin and Minnan use the same writing system with the exception of some 'local' characters in Minnan. Based on my results in Chapter 4, I administered another test to investigate whether the collected Minnan 'face'-related expressions were ready to interpret by Minnan native speakers and Mandarin speakers who did

not speak the Minnan Dialect. The participants included two groups of speakers: 6 speakers of Mandarin who were not fluent in Minnan and 6 native Minnan speakers. They were provided with the list of 'face'-related expressions and were asked to interpret these expressions and provide alternative expressions in Mandarin if available. The result showed that 44 out of 80 Verb/Adjective/Pronoun + 'face' and 'face' + Verb/Adjective/Pronoun 'face'-related expressions do not have counterparts in Mandarin. While the Minnan-speaking participants had no difficulty with interpreting all 'face'-related expressions, the Mandarin speakers often struggled with properly interpreting and, more importantly, translating them to Mandarin. Consequently, my hypothesis that Chinese writing resolves interpretational difficulties for any speaker of Chinese when it comes to Minnan 'face'-related expressions was disconfirmed.

On the basis of the outcomes of Chapters 4 and 5, I engage in a contrastive historical investigation of 'face'-related expressions in Minnan and Mandarin in Chapter 6. This chapter aims to answer my Research Question 3: whether the duality of 'face' *mian* and *lian* in Mandarin and the singularity *mian* in Minnan apply to Chinese historical data. I hypothesised that the duality *mian* and *lian* in Mandarin and the singularity *mian* in Minnan also hold for Chinese historical data. I studied 19 Peking Opera scripts (written in Mandarin, 404,719 characters in total) and 19 Teochew Opera scripts (written in the Minnan Dialect, 401,823 characters in total) compiled during Ming – Qing period. The themes of these two sets of data were all love and family.

Altogether, 50 occurrences of 'face'-related expressions were found in 19 Peking Opera scripts, consisting of 30 various 'face'-related expressions. In 19 Teochew Opera scripts, 112 occurrences of 'face' were obtained, including 54 different 'face'-related expressions. These expressions consisted of Verb/Adjective/Pronoun + 'face' and 'face' + Verb/Adjective/Pronoun polysyllabic structures in both data types. This historical investigation showed that 30 Peking 'face'-related expressions belong to 11 core 'face' expressions, including 5 *mian*-related, 3 *lian*-related and 1 *yan*-related 顏 (*yan*, i.e., face) nominal expressions of 'face', and two compounds *lian-mian* and *yan-mian*. Yet, the infrequency of *yan* in the Peking data indicates that *yan* in Mandarin was unusually used as a reference to the physical face rather than referring to one's honour. This finding implied that the *mian–lian* dichotomy was also valid in understanding the examined historical Mandarin data. On the other hand, *mian* in Peking data

was found can be both used in a 'front/light' and 'back/heavy' way, i.e., the higher-lower relationship of *lian* and *mian* in modern Mandarin is not found in historical Mandarin data.

While in the Teochew data, 54 'face'-related expressions belong to 12 core expressions of 'face', including 10 *mian*-related and 2 *yan*-related nominal expressions of 'face'. These two *yan*-related expressions refer to one's 'back/heavy' 'face' with 22 occurrences while *mian*-expressions can refer to either 'back/heavy' or 'front/light' 'face'. This finding pointed to the fact that 'face' in Minnan was not realised as a singular *mian* in the examined historical data, but also represented as a duality as Mandarin. However, the duality of 'face' in Minnan was *yan* and *mian* instead of *lian* and *mian*. This result falsified my hypothesis about Minnan that a singularity of *mian* in Minnan also exists in the examined historical data. Notwithstanding these significant differences in the core 'face' expressions between historical Mandarin and the Minnan dialect, there are two collocation groups which have very similar uses in the two historical dialects. This outcome shows that although one needs to talk about two different 'face universes' in the two historical dialects, there are still some noteworthy commonalities between them.

Finally, Chapter 7 reviews and summarises the main finding of the previous chapters. To sum up, by studying Minnan 'face'-related expressions, this thesis finds that:

1) the dualism *lian* and *mian(-zi)* and their higher-lower-order relationship does not hold for the use of 'face' in the Minnan Dialect;

2) more than half of the dialectal Chinese 'face'-related expressions in Minnan are uninterpretable in a written form for speakers of other dialects of Chinese;

3) although the duality of 'face' *mian* and *lian* in Mandarin applies to Chinese historical data (during Ming – Qing period), their lower-higher-relationship cannot as *mian* in the examined historical data can also refer to the 'back/heavy' 'face';

4) the singularity *mian* in Minnan does not apply to Chinese historical data as 'face' in historical Minnan (during Ming – Qing period) as it is also represented by a dichotomy *mian* (as both the 'back/heavy' or 'front/light' 'face') and *yan* (as the 'back/heavy' 'face');

5) noteworthy commonalities were found in historical Mandarin and the Minnan dialect

in terms of their pragmatic use of 'face'-related expressions;

6) linguistic idiomatic expressions of 'face' (i.e., 'face'-related expressions) do not necessarily include nominal 'face' components.

In this final chapter, I also discuss the contributions of this study and possible directions for future 'face' research.

Firstly, this thesis provides an overview of Minnan 'face'-related expressions. As a major Chinese dialect and the native tongue of many Chinese migrants overseas, the Minnan Dialect has a large inventory of 'face'-related expressions. However, very little research has been dedicated to the 'face'-related inventory in Minnan and no systematic overview of Minnan 'face'-related expressions has been made. The current study thus fulfils this gap by providing an overview of 80 various 'face'-related expressions in Minnan. It would be no doubt fruitful for future research to investigate 'face'-related idioms in other dialects of Chinese to provide a more comprehensive view on Chinese 'face'-related expressions.

Secondly, the study challenges the long-held assumption that Chinese 'face' is a pan-Chinese notion. The results of this thesis show that synchronic and diachronic variations exist in both modern and historical Mandarin and Minnan, which thus suggest that there may not be such a thing as a single homogeneous concept of 'Chinese face'. Rather, one should distinguish dialectal repertoires of 'face'. Such repertoires may have a lot in common, so differences between them may not so much be differences *in kind* by rather *in degree*. However, the extent of such differences ultimately calls for studying Chinese dialectal repertoires of 'face'-related expressions separately, and also to avoid making *a priori* assumptions about 'face' in Chinese dialects on the basis of Mandarin. It would be important to continue the research I proposed here by studying 'face'-related expressions in other Chinese dialects such as Cantonese and Hakka.

Thirdly, this research shows that it is worth engaging in a historical contrastive study because any difference we found between the historical and modern uses of 'face'-related expressions in the individual dialects are eclipsed once we compare them with historical differences between the two dialectal corpora. I believe that it would be worthwhile in future research to contrastively examine 'face'-related expressions in other Chinese dialects as well

since there are various major dialects – and many sub-dialects – in Chinese. And it would be particularly fruitful to interconnect dialectology and historical pragmatics (see an overview in Meurman-Solin, 2012) in the study of 'face' in Chinese. Such contrastive research would help us unearth the intriguing inventories of 'face'-related expressions across Chinese dialects.

Fourthly, this research project points out that 'face'-related expressions do not obligatorily include face nominal components. Such expressions are not a unique treatise of Minnan but also exist in other dialects of Chinese (see Zhai, 1999, 2021a), or in other languages (see Sifianou, 2013). This finding offers important hints for studying 'face' in those linguacultures which do not have rich 'face'-related expressions with face nominal components. I believe that future investigation on such 'face'-related expressions would contribute to a more holistic view of 'face' and 'facework' in various linguacultures.

Lastly, in this study, I shied away from devoting attention to the relationship between 'face-related expressions in the Minnan Dialect and politeness and impoliteness. The relationship between 'face' and politeness represents an academic can of worms and would need another academic paper. Yet, I believe that the outcomes of this research are definitely relevant for politeness research because the differences identified in this study imply that speakers of Minnan and Mandarin talk about politeness and impoliteness into being in significantly different ways. Considering that politeness and impoliteness come into existence through evaluations, and also that evaluations themselves often get evaluated, the study of such metapragmatic issues is clearly relevant from the point of view of politeness research. I hope this research would lay down the foundations for such future research.

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