

On Saving Face

A Brief History of Western Appropriation

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Preface

The Chinese concept of “face” was almost singlehandedly brought into Western consciousness through the work of the late-nineteenth-century American missionary Arthur H. Smith. Although the term had occasionally appeared in other works before him, this was the first time that anyone had really tried to isolate it and to describe it for a foreign audience. His earliest attempt was in 1888, in a short piece called simply “Face” (in quotation marks), written for his newspaper column “Chinese Characteristics,” which ran in the Shanghai-based *North China Daily News* as well as its weekly version, the *North China Herald*, during the late 1880s. In 1890, his essays were compiled into book form, published in Shanghai and circulated widely throughout Asia. “Face” was Chapter 4. But in 1894 a newly rewritten and reorganized version positively exploded onto the international scene, published both in New York and London and becoming the best-selling book on China of its day. It was continuously reprinted and translated well into the 1930s. One of the most interesting changes was that “Face” was now Chapter 1, as if it represented the point of departure for “Chinese characteristics” as a whole. As Smith put it, “‘face’ will be found to be in itself a key to the combination lock of many of the most important characteristics of the Chinese” (Smith 1894, 17).

It is understandable that the opening chapter of the most admired book of its time would have achieved a certain notoriety, but the speed and the extent to which “face” captured the imagination of the late-1890s reading public was truly extraordinary. Even by the end of the century it had already become something of a buzzword in scholarly works, popular fiction, and international news reports, used not only to describe China but indeed any culture at all. Its complexities, moreover, were immediately reduced to two phrases only, “lose face” and “save face,” which remain fixtures to this day in all European languages, mostly without any hint that they are of Chinese origin. How do we explain this appeal?

The few historical studies of “face” that have been published to date have also rightly focused on Smith’s contributions as well as his many prejudices (Kipnis 1995; Liu 1995; Hevia 2003). But no one has taken the trouble to collect all the relevant references in order to see exactly when and how “face” originated in the

Western imagination and how it developed over time. I was always puzzled by the fact that earlier visitors did not seem to mention “face” at all, since missionaries and other travelers had been coming to the region for hundreds of years and must have heard “face” spoken about all the time. In Chinese and Japanese, for instance, there are dozens of common “face” expressions that have to do with appropriate behavior, preserving social equilibrium, or avoiding shame and humiliation. What I discovered, however, was that earlier authors had actually been talking about “face” all the time, although the word itself was never used. The question, then, is not why “face” wasn’t mentioned before but why it should have been articulated only at the end of the nineteenth century.

“Face” must have fulfilled a certain need at this particular time, and we do not have to look very far to see how it cannot be separated from Western colonialism, especially in the final years of the nineteenth century, when China was at its weakest point and on the verge of being partitioned by the Western powers. As James Hevia has written in his seminal study of British nineteenth-century colonialism in China, the concept of “face” “occurred in a situation of conquest, occupation, and deliberate humiliation” (Hevia 2003, 113). “Face” was a convenient means to “explain” China as a backward and stagnant culture sorely in need of Western “correction.” This might also help to clarify why Westerners didn’t just “discover” “face” but immediately held it up as a primary example of what was *wrong* with China. The basics of Chinese “face” should have been familiar enough to Western readers, for whom the same word can be employed in a number of similarly figurative senses that don’t just mean the front part of the head. In English, for instance, one can “show one’s (true) face” or “have the face” to do something. But rather than investigate these comparative possibilities or think about Confucian “face” in relation to potentially analogous Western codes of prestige or honor, late-nineteenth-century commentators immediately seized upon it as a wholly negative attribute which, they claimed, obstructed the flow of society and obscured the truth. Even as it was first “discovered,” in other words, “face” was already being read as a sign of East Asian backwardness and stagnation.

“Face,” in short, was not just a “Chinese characteristic” but a Western colonial tool, and in the chapters that follow we will see how such a reading continues to play itself out in contemporary Western “face” locutions, which, we will remember, are all about “losing” and “saving.” It is worth remembering that “lose face” and “save face” are not, in English at least, even grammatically correct. This is because they derive not from Chinese but from Chinese Pidgin English, another colonial remnant that supposedly imitated Chinese locutions. It is indeed the case that “lose face” is a word-for-word translation of the Chinese phrases *diu lian* or *diu mianzi* (丟臉, 丟面子), but what about “save face,” its apparent opposite? In fact, “saving face,” as my title indicates, is the real center of this book because, as we will see, that particular expression, while certainly modeled after “lose face,” is not just a simple translation but actually a foreign invention.

Pidgin “Face”

“Lose face” and “save face” have become so normalized in modern Western languages that most speakers probably do not even realize that the idioms are of Chinese origin. They regularly appear in every variety of both scholarly and popular discourse, including academic books, news stories, films, TV shows, pulp magazines, and online postings—usually without quotation marks and only occasionally alluding to an East Asian connection. They are also the subject of numerous puns that take them even further from their Chinese source: one can “lose face” through cosmetic surgery or disfigurement, or “save face” by means of facial recognition technology. My personal favorite is a book titled *Saving Face: The Art and History of the Goalie Mask* (Hynes and Smith 2008).

But what do Westerners mean when they speak of “losing face” or “saving face”? Dictionaries give us standard examples such as: “he was too proud to lose face so didn’t want to show his nervousness,” or “rather than fire her they let her save face by accepting her resignation.” We are told that “losing face” means being humiliated, and that “saving face” is trying to avoid the same thing: to protect oneself (or someone else) from embarrassment, to avoid a loss of respect, to keep up appearances. “Face” is defined as reputation, honor, or good name, and etymological notes regularly explain that this sense of the word has a Chinese origin, usually giving *diu lian* (丟臉) or *diu mianzi* (丟面子) (both are literally “lose face”) as the main source. What dictionaries do not tell us, however, is how the Chinese phrases actually managed to become the Western ones, even though at first glance “lose face” and “save face” might seem to be nothing more than word-for-word translations that, like their cousins “long time no see” or “no can do,” preserve Chinese speech patterns exactly and (at least in English) aren’t even grammatically correct.

In linguistics, such constructions are known as calques, and other English examples include “superman” (from German), “flea market” (from French), or “blue blood” (from Spanish). Most often these are nouns or noun phrases, but on rare occasions a more complex semantic locution is borrowed without alteration, and one might well wonder why this should occur. What was so attractive about “lose face,” “no can do,” or “long time no see”? Why have they been preserved?

Historical dictionaries like the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) or the *Grand Robert* for French are more helpful because they remind us that all of these calques were imported to the West during the nineteenth century, and that they were introduced through the foreign trading communities that were established in Chinese seaports (especially Canton) beginning in the late seventeenth century. In its current (third) edition published online, the OED tersely notes that “face” was “originally used by the English trading community in China” (oed.com). But if one begins to study the evidence more carefully, one soon realizes that many of the earliest examples were not just traders’ observations about Chinese people or Chinese culture, where “face,” as we will see in a moment, was always of paramount importance. Rather, “face” first came into Western consciousness through quotations—almost always derogatory and condescending—of local people speaking what is now known as Chinese Pidgin English, a hybrid language used for international communication in areas of China frequented by foreign merchants. While the term “pidgin” is attested to as early as 1807, it was first called Pidgin English in the mid-nineteenth century; as several early commentators explained, it just means “business English,” as “pidgin” was supposed to be the Chinese mode of pronouncing the word “business” (Baker and Mühlhäusler 1990, 92–93). Originally a mixture of Portuguese and Malay and Indian words, English ones became predominant by the early nineteenth century, along with the predominance of the British trade.

“Face” was not simply “used by the English trading community in China,” in other words, but was something that was heard, cited, drawn upon, and repeated in a kind of *conversation* that occurred in a highly restricted space and using a peculiar hybrid language. We also have to keep in mind that the environment of this conversation changed markedly over time, especially during the nineteenth century. As I have argued in a previous book, before the 1840s all foreigners’ actions were very tightly controlled, not just in terms of trade but with respect to any form of communication, including diplomatic embassies (Keevak 2017). All (legal) business dealings were heavily restricted as well, having to be carried out only with a limited number of licensed Chinese traders known as Hong merchants. Foreign traders were mostly confined to their warehouses in Canton, and at the end of the season they were officially required to leave the country, with many spending the summer months in Macao. Finally, China instituted linguistic restraints, since it was forbidden by law to teach Chinese to foreign visitors.

But at the conclusion of the First Opium War in 1842 many things changed. China became, for the first time in its history, a colonial contact zone and was compelled to surrender to the dictates of Western desires: a number of “treaty ports” were forcibly opened, where foreigners could reside year-round and trade with anyone they wished. Tariffs were to be regularized and made fully public. Consuls for foreign countries were permitted as well, who could communicate directly with Chinese government officials for the first time. But the use of Pidgin English not only continued but greatly increased, as more foreigners came to trade in the treaty

ports and the language spread to other parts of China. It is only at *this* moment that “face” would begin to become popularized, and the reasons for this development need to be carefully considered.

Before we go any further, however, we must try to understand what “face” means in Chinese culture and how it differs from modern Western usage. I must say at the outset, though, that I am not a sinologist, and moreover that this concept is so deeply rooted in traditional Chinese (or, more properly, Confucian) thought that it has never been adequately circumscribed by Chinese scholars (or scholars of Chinese) either. Yet I believe that even the most elementary student will be able to recognize that Western adaptations of “face” are at best highly reductive. In Chinese, too, “face” can mean something like reputation, just as “losing face” entails embarrassment, but “face” as a figurative notion (not just the front of the head, in other words) is expressed by three different Chinese characters (*lian*, *mian*, and *yan* [臉, 面, 顏], all of which mean “face”), which are used in more than one hundred different idiomatic expressions. One can “have face,” “look at face,” “increase face,” “give face,” “injure face,” “struggle for face,” “borrow face,” “seek face,” “leave face,” “tear up face,” and a host of others (Hu 1944; Carr 1992–1993).

Lian and *mian* are the most common, and while they often overlap and are sometimes interchangeable, *mian* is much closer to Western ideas because it involves prestige and affectation. *Lian*, however, more properly signifies one’s moral character or one’s standing as a good person. When Westerners speak of face, they generally mean their *mian* or outward reputation only, but in Chinese the idea of *lian* runs much deeper than this and has to do ultimately with one’s status as a human being—and, potentially, even with one’s ability to have relations with other people. This is why “losing face” in a Chinese context can have such dire consequences.

“Face” in Chinese culture is more like a code of behavior, perhaps closest in the Western tradition to the code of chivalry, although situated in a rather different moral and religious universe. The real source of “face” is the doctrine of Confucianism, which stresses being a part of society and engaging in “proper” behavior, known in Chinese as *li* (禮), a classical character that can be translated as ritual, propriety, etiquette, or courtesy (all of which are equally hard to define in English). The basis of *li* is to behave correctly, to create social harmony, and to avoid conflict (but not necessarily acquiesce) in all one’s interpersonal relationships. It is instilled in each member of society through the dictates of filial piety, loyalty, good faith, and maintaining a positive social image—both of oneself as well as the groups to which one belongs: the family, the village, the school or workplace, the nation, and so on.

As unsatisfying as this explanation might seem, it is important to remember that unlike in Western monotheistic thinking, in which the only thing that ultimately matters is one’s relationship to one’s creator God, *li* or *lian* are thoroughly worldly and based on a person’s place in a chain of communities or a series of concentric circles. Both *li* and *lian*, in short, are socialization processes in which one

is urged to live according to one's place and according to socially accepted norms. But *li* and *lian* are also the basis for the idea of "face" as *mian* (which, we will recall, seemed very much like the Western notion of prestige or status), and thus even "reputation" in Confucian society is not really the same as it is in the West.

This is because Westerners typically assume that their social status is a matter of their own making, an accumulation of wealth and power through hard work and careful attention, and that therefore it can always be lost through bad luck or bad decisions, just as it can be saved for opposite reasons. In Confucian cultures, however, prestige is much more socialized because it is determined by how others see you, not just by your own (self-)worth. "Face" as *mian* is given (or taken away) *by others*, not just something you can build (or destroy) by yourself. It is constituted by its effects and by the way others treat you, and it is for this reason that "face" is not just won or lost but can also be given, borrowed, injured, torn apart, or preserved for someone else.

Most of these phrases would mean little to Western speakers, who continue to use the term in a far more limited way, although there are some contexts in which a more Confucian sense might be implied, such as when someone is allowed to "save face" out of compassion or politeness, or when a person who doesn't want to "lose face" proudly presses on despite a series of difficult setbacks. But these usages are aftereffects of the original importations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which as I have mentioned before were almost always derogatory.

Early dictionaries of Chinese published in Europe naturally included *lian* and *mian*, both very common characters (*Dicionário* [c. 1585] 2001, fol. 141; Kircher 1670, 353; de Guignes 1813, 602, 839), and on at least one occasion a more metaphorical sense was also provided: *timian* (體面, literally, "substance face") was defined as "honor" in a short Chinese-French dictionary published in 1670 (Kircher 1670, 355). But the first real reference to "face" occurred in an English source and quite early in the context of the foreign trade at Canton. In his diary of 1732–1733, an Englishman in the employ of the Swedish East India Company mentioned the phrase "handsome face" on several occasions, which he explained as a term for bribery. A Chinese merchant, he reported, "said that if I would . . . give a reasonable price . . . he would make me a very handsome face (an expression they use when they intend to offer a handsome present or some way or other to make it worth our while to deal with them)." But the author was indignant: "I wanted no handsome faces of any Body," he complained, adding that "such is the strong appetite of the Chinese for money and gain, that should the old Gentleman in Black with his cloven foot appear with silver in his paw they would ask no questions or scruple to make him very welcome and even handsome face, though it should smell of the place he brought it from" (*Passage* [1732] 1996, 100, 105).

It is revealing that the very first time we encounter "face" it is already in a wholly negative context (bribery) as well as something cited to suggest the covering up of an unseemly reality (greed, secretiveness, underhanded behavior). "Handsome"

was a very common all-purpose term that could be used in many senses (good, large, fitting, agreeable, good-looking), but why “face”? In fact, “handsome face” may correspond to the Chinese phrase *shang lian* (賞臉), which could be used to describe courtesies and gifts (including monetary ones) and literally means “bestow face” or “appreciate face” (two senses quite alien to Western ideas of “face” as reputation). As a formula of politeness, it also meant something like “do me the honor.”

“Handsome face,” in other words, was from the beginning a perfect example of the subtleties that governed (and still governs) the use of the word “face” in many aspects of Chinese life, and even if it could also mean taking money in exchange for favors it became for Westerners a term that signified nothing more than devious negotiation. In 1844 an early Hong Kong resident confirmed that the phrase was still in use as a term for bribes and provided a quote in Pidgin English to prove it: “Now you say poor man—suppose not rich man—how can show handsome face—get large ship; showing a handsome face being always used for presenting a handsome bribe in the Canton dialect” (Cunynghame 1844, 1:279). Another witness writing in 1762 provided a more general explanation of how “handsome face” would have been used in everyday speech, but here the information was given in a typically disparaging comment about the defects of Chinese Pidgin English as well as the people who spoke it: “They cannot pronounce the letter *r* at all. *Fuki* with them signifies *Friend*; and when they would say, *I saluted him*, or *made my compliments to him*, they say, *I moiki handsom face for he*, *I moiki grandi chin-chin for he*” (Noble 1762, 262–63). “Handsome face” was also frequently mentioned as a phrase used by Canton portrait painters to advertise their skills for Western clients (Hickey [1769] 1913–1925, 1:227; Davis 1836, 2:25; Downing 1838, 2:117; *Last* 1843, 62; Cooke 1858, 225).

As far as Westerners were concerned, “face” originated in the potentially deceitful and corrupt world of Chinese commerce—or, rather, in the kinds of negotiation required for such interactions to take place. “Face” was noticed because it was supposedly the only way to do business, and like Chinese culture itself it was quoted, ridiculed, and finally appropriated into the Westerner’s own mercantile vernacular. Fervent criticism of China had become the rule. One of the most popular authorities in the second half of the eighteenth century was Commodore George Anson, who had stopped at Canton during his circumnavigation in the early 1740s and had come into sharp conflict with Chinese authorities when he refused to pay the required customs duties (he was not a trader, he said) and assumed that he could protest directly to the local magistrate. Although his best-selling narrative never mentioned “face,” it did not hesitate to condemn the “fraudulent and selfish turn of temper” of both Chinese merchants and the Canton government. The Chinese may brag of their “composure and external decency,” he concluded, but this did nothing to prevent an essential “hypocrisy and fraud” in their culture (Anson 1748, 393, 413–14).

It is thus entirely fitting that “handsome face” rather than any other locution should have been our earliest recorded example of “face” in the West, and although it was mentioned only a handful of times the condescending attitude that accompanied it was pervasive. “Lose face” suffered much the same fate, although it was not used in a Western publication until nearly a century later. It also made its first appearance in the context of trade, in the journals of Samuel Shaw, the first American consul in Canton in the 1780s, who used it in a Pidgin English quotation (“truly all Fanquois [i.e., foreigners] have much lose his face in this business”), as well as in an anecdote about those who do not pay their debts (“the debtor has then *lost his face*, and no person will afterwards trust him”) (Shaw [c. 1785] 1847, 195, 197). These journals were first published in 1847. Much more influential, however, were the host of “face” expressions that appeared in the pioneering Chinese and English dictionary published between 1815 and 1823 by Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary to China. Arriving in 1807, he set about on a grueling and ambitious lexicographic program that included language acquisition (both standard Mandarin and Cantonese), the publication of major bilingual dictionaries (Chinese-English and Cantonese-English), and a complete translation of the Old and New Testaments.

Since his Mandarin dictionary included not just individual characters but thousands of phrases and citations as well, *lian* and *mian* made frequent appearances in various combinations, and it is noteworthy that their English equivalents usually needed to be explained (“‘having face’ means respectability”; “to scratch one’s face; i.e., to injure one’s reputation”; “everybody will look on you with scorn (a cold face)” [Morrison 1815–1823, 3:159, 362, 379]). In Morrison’s first volume of 1815, *diu lian* (丟臉) was duly included, but here it was not translated as “lose face” but instead as “‘to throw away countenance’; i.e., to blast one’s reputation” (Morrison 1815–1823, 1:1:23). Four years later, another entry included *diu lian* but defined it in a different and somewhat more Confucian way, since it dealt with someone else rather than just oneself: “to throw away a person’s reputation, to say something to the disgrace of a person” (Morrison 1815–1823, 2:1:537). In 1822, finally, Morrison’s English-Chinese section included “lose face” under the headword “reputation,” and this is our earliest known example of the phrase in a Western publication: “to lose face; i.e., reputation and respectability.” But here the Chinese equivalent was not *diu lian* but an analogous phrase, *shi timian* (失體面, literally, “lose substance face”) (Morrison 1815–1823, 3:362) [Figure 1.1].

It is clear from these entries that in the early 1820s, “face” and “lose face” were not yet common English expressions, and a similar situation prevailed in Morrison’s *Vocabulary of the Canton Dialect* published in 1828, where *diu lian* was defined as “degrade in respectability” (Morrison 1828, part 1, sig. F2). But in a private letter from 1830, published after his death four years later, Morrison also referred to a setback in one of his ongoing battles with the Canton government in terms of “face”:

Diplomatic “Face”

It is not difficult to read everything ever written about “face” in the West before 1890, the date of the first edition of Arthur Smith’s *Chinese Characteristics*. But once that book had begun to exert its influence, and especially after its second edition in 1894 had turned “face” into Chapter 1, it would soon become impossible to keep up with all the instances in which the concept was now being employed by commentators of every imaginable variety. No longer just a curious or exotic word translated into Western languages via Pidgin English, or even just a colonialist slur meant to characterize the falseness and dishonesty of Confucian cultures, “face” was rapidly becoming a term which, as we will see, might not even have anything to do with China. One of the earliest examples of this new phase, which I mentioned at the conclusion of the last chapter, was a letter to the editor of the *Times* in 1898 accusing Britain of being just as interested in “face” as the Chinese. “Unquestionably,” the letter said, “the process of saving one’s face leads to curious results in other countries than China” (“Wei-hai-wei” 1898, 14).

Let us remember, however, that what this author seized upon was “*saving face*,” which wasn’t even an authentic Chinese expression. In fact, the history of “face” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be characterized as the predominance of “save face” over the original Chinese calque, “lose face,” which remained a more or less fixed expression. “Save face,” on the other hand, not only became much more common but also far more lexicalized, which is to say much more integrated into Western local vernaculars. As we saw in Chapter 1, “to save one’s face” was first added to the OED in 1910, the newest edition of which attests to the fact that by that same date the phrase had also been used as an adjective (“face-saving”), a noun (“save-face,” “face-saver”), and an expression with a variety of pronouns added to make it more grammatically correct (oed.com). Even earlier in France, the *Nouveau Larousse illustré* had included the fully normalized phrases “perdre sa face” [to lose one’s face] and “se sauver la face” [to save (one’s own) face] around 1900, claiming that both were “borrowed from the Chinese language” (*Nouveau Larousse* 1897–1904, 4:417). And in the United States, an equally normalized “to save one’s (his) face” was incorporated into the *Funk and Wagnalls New*

Standard Dictionary in 1913, where it—but not “to lose face”—was identified as “colloquial” (*Funk and Wagnalls* 1913, 1:887).

In the last chapter we saw how so many of the earliest examples of “save face” were aligned with the Western phrase “to save appearances,” which had almost nothing in common with the Chinese tradition. I argued that for most Westerners, and especially for the Western missionaries who first popularized it, “saving face” was fraudulent and deceitful. It was decried as a cover-up of the truth because it deviated from one’s obligation to own up to one’s mistakes and to atone for one’s guilt. This is what Westerners meant by “saving.” East Asian people, on the other hand, were judged as practicing the opposite of this moral code because they were more interested in form than in ethics. This is why Arthur Smith could make “face” the foundation of what he called “Chinese characteristics,” and this prejudice can be seen in the early dictionary definitions as well. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, the OED said that to “save face” was to “avoid being disgraced or humiliated,” and an etymological note added that the phrase was used “with reference to the continual devices among the Chinese to avoid incurring or inflicting disgrace” (*OED* 1884–1928, 8:2:137). The *Nouveau Larousse* explained “saving face” as “protect[ing] one’s dignity in order to give the appearance of being victorious, even and above all when one is beaten” (*Nouveau Larousse* 1897–1904, 4:417), and in an equally detailed explanation, Funk and Wagnalls spoke of “retir[ing], under some pretext, from negotiations that have proved or are likely to prove unsatisfactory, in such a manner as to protect one’s dignity” (*Funk and Wagnalls* 1913, 1:887).

These definitions, however, were not simply moral explanations. Each of them focused on another factor that had come to the fore during this period, which for want of a better term I would like to call the element of diplomacy, with all its accompanying Western bias. In each of these definitions, in other words, “saving face” was given a political dimension as well as a moral one: an “avoidance,” a “device,” an “appearance,” a “pretext,” and most interestingly, a “negotiation.” While Arthur Smith’s moralistic version of “face” had embodied an explanatory value for Westerners striving to understand the complex workings of Chinese society, I would argue that by the last years of the nineteenth century the idea of “saving face” had become a filter through which the West could interpret China’s supposed failures to measure up to Western ideological and political paradigms.

This is not to say that “saving face” did not have a political dimension from the start; I noted in Chapter 1 how the very earliest usages of the phrase appeared just before the end of the First Opium War in 1842, when “saving the emperor’s face” was singled out as a key aspect of British negotiations with China. Other early instances can be found in the pages of the *North China Daily News* and its weekly edition, the *North China Herald*, both published in Shanghai. I cited a few of these in the previous chapter, including one from 1882 that accused the Chinese government of trying to “save the face” of the Zongli Yamen by only temporarily removing an official who had assaulted a foreign consul (“Demonstration” 1882, 3). For the sake

of completeness, there were a handful of other occurrences. In 1889, a lead story claimed that if the British had begun steamer service on the Upper Yangtze river despite being forbidden to do so by the Chefoo Convention of 1876, the Chinese government “might have sent in a formal remonstrance in order to save its ‘face,’ but it would have accepted the situation” (“Promotion” 1889, 3). In 1891, another editorial on foreign envoys believed that “China may save her ‘face’” if she allowed foreign diplomats to choose whether to observe Western or Chinese protocols when being summoned to an imperial audience (“Mr. Hsueh” 1891, 3). In 1893, a column on the French occupation of northern Vietnam argued that Chinese forces trying to contain the invasion “could only hope to ‘save their face’” by retreating across the border (“Plan” 1893, 3). And during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, after the fall of Lushun Port (known to the West as Port Arthur) in late 1894, a correspondent stated that China’s brief spell of resistance during the siege “was merely to ‘save face’” (“Tientsin” 1894, 930).

These examples suggest that “save face,” always kept in quotation marks, had become a recognized locution among the treaty port community by the mid-1890s. One can find it in private sources as well, such as the recently published letters of Robert Hart, who beginning in the 1860s served for nearly fifty years as Inspector General of China’s Imperial Maritime Customs Service. “Save face” (in quotations marks) appears in his weekly correspondence to his secretary in London as early as 1881, and as in the Shanghai news stories it was a phrase that did not seem to require any further explanation (Hart [1881–1884] 1975, 1:367, 474, 569).

After the fall of Port Arthur, however, the wider international press was suddenly filled with stories about the war, especially when China had found itself so quickly and summarily defeated by its much smaller neighbor, now beginning to form a colonial empire of its own. It seemed as if “save face,” too, had become the phrase of the moment. The *Times*, for example, used it at least six times during 1895 to characterize Chinese behavior. In January the paper’s Tokyo correspondent scoffed at China’s attempts to convince Western governments to intervene in the conflict, claiming that “to save her face at home by bowing her head in the dust abroad is a kind of statesmanship which, though not inconsistent with China’s display of miserable incompetence throughout this war, cannot fail to provoke the ridicule and disgust of a proud, high-spirited people like the Japanese” (“China and Japan” 1895, 4) [Figure 4.1]. A second report, published in April by (presumably) the same correspondent, was equally critical of a Chinese naval commander who hoped to “save his face” by securing the return of a torpedo cruiser after the Battle of Weihaiwei, during which most of the Chinese fleet was sunk, because the ship had originally come from the southern squadron and had only accidentally become part of the fighting in the north—as if, that is, the southern and northern squadrons were not even part of the same country’s navy. The correspondent called this “a startling though comical illustration of [the] absence of national responsibility” in China, and the Japanese press, he said, were equally derisive: “after all,” they wrote,

“[the commander] is only a typical Chinaman.” “Is there any higher type?” the correspondent sarcastically added (“War” 1895, 6). The third piece, published in June at the end of the war, argued that China was trying to “save her face” by insisting that its recent cession of the entire Liaodong Peninsula (Port Arthur lies at its southernmost tip) was only a long-term lease, not a permanent loss of territory (“Japan” 1895, 8).

CHINA AND JAPAN.

(FROM OUR TOKIO CORRESPONDENT.)

TOKIO, Nov. 17.

China's repeated attempts to procure the intervention of Western Powers between herself and Japan are provoking surprise and contempt among the Japanese. The conduct of the Middle Kingdom in times of peace has never been such as to establish a claim upon foreign sympathy in times of war. A Power that habitually holds Occidental countries at arm's length, that despises their civilization and repels their intercourse, should have more sense of self-respect than to run to them for succour in the first moment of sharp distress. To save her face at home by bowing her head in the dust abroad is a kind of statesmanship which, though not inconsistent with China's display of miserable incompetence throughout this war, cannot fail to provoke the ridicule and disgust of a proud, high-spirited people like the Japanese. To them the humiliation involved in such a course seems far more painful than the simple, old-fashioned method of casting away the hilt of a shattered sword. But, if the statesmen in Peking think differently, if rather than deal directly with the enemy at their gates they prefer to go abroad in search of a mediator, they will find Japan all the more difficult to satisfy. To sue for peace when further resistance becomes hopeless is a kind of “humble pie” that fate has condemned all vanquished nations to swallow from time immemorial. If China's gorge still rises at the unsavoury morsel, she must take some more beating to correct her squeamishness.

Figure 4.1: The beginning of a *Times* story on the Sino-Japanese War published in January 1895 (the report is dated November the previous year). The correspondent notes that “to save her face at home by bowing her head in the dust abroad is a kind of statesmanship which, though not inconsistent with China's display of miserable incompetence throughout this war, cannot fail to provoke the ridicule and disgust of a proud, high-spirited people like the Japanese.” National Taiwan University Library.

Although each of these columns may have been composed by the same hand, it is interesting how varied and how flexible "saving face" had become for the Western imagination (and how quickly!). It was as if the phrase were already a lens through which any of China's actions during the war could be seen, and China's attempts to "save its face" formed an integral part of what this particular correspondent referred to as the empire's "miserable" and "incompetent" form of "statesmanship." Our second set of examples took this view even further, appearing in a twelve-part series in the *Times* on "The Far Eastern Question" published immediately after the war's conclusion. Originally issued anonymously, the columns were then expanded and republished in 1896 as by Valentine Chirol, a well-known journalist, inveterate traveler, and another of the paper's special correspondents during this period (Chirol 1896).

As Chirol's title suggests, the main interest of these pieces was how the war might affect the political and commercial interests of the British empire, as well as how Britain should deal with its Western competitors in the region. Following upon the heels of the "scramble for Africa," which had begun in the previous decade, the idea of partitioning China had become the next arena for Western expansion. "Whether the scramble for the Far East be near at hand or whether it may yet be averted," Chirol wrote in his twelfth and last column, Britain "cannot trust for the defense of rights so well defined and of interests so vital as hers to the mere contingency of doubtful alliances and understandings." "Still less," he averred in his final sentence, "can she surrender them without shaking to its very foundations the whole structure of political power and commercial enterprise upon which her world Empire has been built up" ("Far Eastern XII" 1895, 6; Chirol 1896, 196).

Compared to this vision of global empire, China was seen as the absolute antithesis: inward-looking, static, out of date, inefficient, unprogressive, unpatriotic, unfeeling toward its people, and so on. "A more hopeless spectacle of fatuous imbecility, made up in equal parts of arrogance and helplessness . . . it is almost impossible to conceive," Chirol began his second entry. A major component of this behavior was China's supposed predisposition toward "saving face," which Chirol condemned in three different columns. His second entry twice accused Chinese leaders of attempting to "save face," while the fifth, published a week later, observed that "China was not allowed to save her 'face'" when being forced to borrow money to pay its war indemnity to Japan. The tenth, even more insultingly, insisted that "a Chinaman especially, even when prepared from the very outset to accept practically the terms offered to him, will always expect some trifling point to be conceded to him which shall 'save his face'" ("Far Eastern II" 1895, 6; "Far Eastern V" 1895, 6; "Far Eastern X" 1895, 8; Chirol 1896, 9, 11, 18, 74, 155).

Such anti-Chinese sentiment had been in the air for some time, and the idea that "trifling points" would be part of the negotiations was also a contemporary cliché. In a story on France and Siam printed in 1893, the *North China Daily News* reported that "any Oriental government" presumed that "they could haggle . . . over

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