



Anne-Laure Monfret

Tales from the Frontline: Saving Face in China

Understanding Chinese business culture has always been more an art than science. Unlike what most of us are used to in the West, Chinese see the issue of “face” differently. In her new book entitled *Saving Face in China, A First-Hand Guide for Any Traveller to China*, French business consultant and author Anne-Laure Monfret shares her insights on the complicated subject and offers practical day-to-day advices for western executives about business etiquette and customs in China.

biz.hk: What inspires you to write this book?

Monfret: Misunderstandings! As a business management consultant, I’ve always been fascinated by cross-cultural topics and communication. When I was in China, I realized that there were a lot of communication problems and misunderstandings between the Chinese and Westerners that came from “saving face” and “losing face” issues. Even if everyone was aware that “face” was a cultural key in doing business in China, the meaning of “face” (mianzi) was, quite surprisingly, often misunderstood or misinterpreted by Westerners. So I decided to do extensive research. And I interviewed many businessmen and women working in China to share their real life experiences with everyone confronted with the same difficulties.

biz.hk: Why is the problem so complicated?

Monfret: What is most difficult for Westerners to understand, even after

many years working with the Chinese, is how face often takes priority over other business aspects. Even if it is a universal notion, Westerners don’t value face as much as the Chinese do. Face challenges our innermost Western values and convictions. For instance, if a Chinese partner avoids saying something or even tells a “white lie,” an American may understand that his partner is probably trying to preserve face (his own face, others’ faces or even the American’s face.) However, it still remains difficult for the American to assimilate the importance of face since, in his own Western culture, the value of speaking directly trumps ruffling feathers.

biz.hk: What’s the difference between face and pride/honor/respect – in a business context?

Monfret: That’s the million-dollar question. Face is similar to honor but it shouldn’t be mistaken with the Western chivalric sense of honor. Face is not just a matter of personal pride or self-respect.

Rather face is more about reputation or social shame. What is important to understand is that it is not simply a



personal affair or a matter of individual slight but also concerns the group and social position.

In a business context, that means that when you cause someone to lose face,

you have to consider all the people involved (the employees, the company, the client...). Let’s say you contradict Mr Wang during a meeting. You not only personally hurt him and his pride, but, more importantly, Mr Wang risks losing his social position with others. Furthermore, you will have to repair the relationship not only between you and him, but also between him and the persons who witnessed the loss of face.

biz.hk: Many young Chinese business executives are educated in the West. Do they see the issue of “face” differently from their parents? If yes, in what ways?

Monfret: Sure. The young business people pay less attention to strictly obeying the rules, and they seem to be direct, as is the “American way,” in their corporate communication. Recently, one young Chinese executive offered a clock to a Chinese client. He didn’t know, that in China, you cannot give a clock as a gift, since it is thought to bring misfortune (the Chinese word for clock is “zhong” and it also means “being on one’s death bed.”) He should have had read my book!

However, even if China is changing very quickly with globalization and the loss of some traditional Chinese customs, young executives still attach a lot of importance to “face”, more specifically, in their respectful attitude towards their bosses and high-ranking executives.

biz.hk: Can you give an example of how

causing a Chinese partner/client to lose face can affect business in each of these situations: 1. you are managing a business in China; 2. you are trading with a Chinese business? And what are your suggested remedies?

Monfret: Let’s say you berate one of your Chinese sales managers in public by pointing out a mistake he has made. He may quit because of the loss of face he has suffered (this often happens.) Moreover, you risk losing your credibility in the eyes of the other employees who find your lack of tact inconsistent with being a good manager who knows how to stay in control. In any case, your business will be affected.

If you are trading with a Chinese business, a loss of face to your trading partner translates into a loss of money for you. The Chinese are prepared to lose a new contract or stop doing business with you only because they have suffered a loss of face. It is because “face,” essential to a good relationship, is the key to maintaining business in China.

The remedy is to avoid causing a loss of face in the first place! If you awkwardly insist on saying “I am very sorry about what I said or what I did,” this will often make matters worse. However, in some very serious situations, you will have to apologize. And in this case, the apologies will have to be given publicly, in front of those who witnessed the incident and in a formal manner. Another way is to give face back to your partner. Among other ways, you can compliment your

employee’s work in front of others or invite your trading partner to a good dinner. By giving them face, you re-establish the balance.

biz.hk: In your book, you explain that Chinese see humor differently. In business conferences and meetings, making jokes as a way to “break the ice” is very common. In your opinion, should foreigners make jokes (humor) in business meetings with the Chinese? And how to overcome the problem of translation?

Monfret: It all depends on the kind of humor. If you make a joke, there’s always the chance that your joke is misunderstood and it will make everybody feel ill at ease. Ironic or sarcastic humor can be risky not just because of potential problems with translation, but it may be perceived by the Chinese as criticism, thus causing a loss of face.

Generally, the Chinese, in fact, appreciate and use humor as a way to break the ice or lighten the mood. So, let them make the jokes. As for the problem of translation, may I suggest that you learn to tell a joke in Chinese?

biz.hk: In your experience, what are the taboos for Chinese in business conversation?

Monfret: It’s better to avoid sensitive issues such as human rights and internal Chinese politics. For reasons of face, the Chinese are very sensitive to any criticism of their country. Sometimes Western businessmen question the work conditions in a manufacturing plant. Emphasizing such a topic at the onset even before raising more specific business matters – or trying to build a relationship – may really offend the Chinese. Generally speaking, you can offer a quality product or a fantastic service, but your Chinese partner will not even consider that product or service if you haven’t laid the groundwork of a sound business relationship by paying attention to the importance of face.

Editor’s note: *Saving Face in China, A First-Hand Guide for Any Traveller to China* is now available online from Amazon and Barnes and Nobles.