

Essay

# Losing Face

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**Abstract:** Notions of “face” play a central role in traditional East Asian ethics and, in particular, in Confucian views about the self and its cultivation. Awareness of and attention to face is central to self-reflection and evaluation and, when properly employed, motivate one to continue to strive to improve oneself morally. Today, the Chinese Communist Party seeks to monitor and control its population by means of an extensive system of surveillance that is increasingly controlled by artificial intelligence programs. This not only undermines traditional conceptions of face but ultimately the role and ability of the party to set and enforce its own view of what Chinese citizens should seek and pursue.

**Keywords:** face; self-cultivation; AI; party; Social Credit System

## 1. Introduction

While conceived of and functioning differently across the diverse cultures of the world, “face” describes a phenomenon that exists in every human society. In its most ubiquitous and basic sense, it describes the public presentation and perception of the self (Earle 1997). Someone who “has face” possesses something of positive social value, something that arises from social approval of a person’s status, action, character, or state of being (Goffman 1967). Conversely, someone who “loses face” has suffered a loss in social value concerning their status, action, character, or state of being. In addition to public perception, “face” has an internal psychological aspect as well: it captures one’s self image and evaluation of oneself in regard to shared ethical standards and social hierarchies, expectations, and norms.

Face is particularly important in East Asian societies such as China and is found in two closely related forms: *mianzi* 面子 and *lian* 臉.<sup>1</sup> The first is the more popular conception and primarily concerns wealth, social status, position, power, and prestige; the latter is explicitly connected with evaluations of moral character and behavior. A person can have *mianzi*—e.g., have status, position, power, and prestige—but lack a corresponding level of *lian*—e.g., can be regarded as corrupt or otherwise morally bad. A complete lack of *lian*, though, will erode and eventually undermine one’s *mianzi*. Someone with great *lian* will, as a consequence, have considerable *mianzi*.

## 2. Government Surveillance in Contemporary China

In contemporary Chinese society, the question of face has taken on a new and disturbing form that profoundly affects these more traditional, Confucian-inspired conceptions. China’s rapidly expanding network of surveillance cameras increasingly relies upon AI-aided facial recognition technology to achieve much of its primary mission: to keep track of, record, control, and modify the behavior of all of

<sup>1</sup> The former is the older word. See (Hu 1944).

its citizens.<sup>2</sup> Within this system, “face” really has nothing to do with traditional conceptions of moral or social status—at least, the ideal forms of these—it is not about how one views oneself or how the members of one’s community regard one. Instead, it is to be an object under the gaze of a systematic government surveillance system established by the party and, what is new and different, guided by increasingly sophisticated AI. Our primary interest is what this does to the traditional notions of *mianzi* and *lian* as well as related ideas about virtue, as understood in the Confucian tradition in particular but also virtue ethics more broadly. In conclusion, we also will note an unanticipated implication that the new mass surveillance carries for the party, an implication that betokens a more general concern with the ethics of AI.

### 3. Social and Ethical Implications of the Present System

In regard to the first set of issues, roughly, our view is that the new surveillance culture largely eliminates not only the concern with but also the possibility of traditional, Confucian-inspired conceptions of face and their related conceptions of virtue. By focusing on the physical face for identification and assessing each citizen purely in terms of her or his perceived benefit or harm to the state—measured in terms of the Social Credit System (SCS) 社会信用体系—the new surveillance fundamentally alters the senses and functions of the traditional concepts of face; it eliminates both the internal, moral dimension of self, as well as its external, socially constructed dimension.<sup>3</sup> In a very real sense, it constitutes an ultimate and complete loss of the traditional notions of face.

In the West, similar issues are discussed in terms of the right to privacy and the need to protect personal space, as well as social activity and institutions, and there is great merit in this line of reasoning. What we are interested in, though, is a related line of argument that can be used to complement such concerns but arises out of and depends upon traditional Confucian ideas about understanding and improving the self. It is important to explore and analyze this perspective, not only because it provides an alternative moral perspective on mass surveillance, but also because it is of great significance to people in these cultures, especially because this perfectionist approach to virtue often is hijacked by those seeking to defend the surveillance state by appealing to distorted and transparently self-serving conceptions of common and personal well-being. Briefly, such attempted defence rests on the idea that since “collectivist” Confucians hold that everyone is capable of and should aim at becoming morally noble, why should they or anyone else worry about surveillance? Since the state is pursuing this policy in order to “maintain order” and eliminate “disruptive elements”, including, of course, “terrorists,” well-intentioned and patriotic people should welcome and embrace AI-guided state surveillance as a prosthetic contributing not only to the safety and security of the state but also to the cultivation of the self (*xiuyang* 修養). On such a view, state-guided surveillance offers a new and powerful technology for improving both self and society.

This, however, misrepresents and undermines the fundamental assumptions, aims, and methods of traditional Confucian conceptions of moral self-cultivation. While Confucianism is a broad term encompassing a vast range of different theories and approaches, all of them share the basic view that morality concerns a view about human nature and its cultivation, aimed at enhancing the welfare of self, family, community, society, and the world by producing people of humane and admirable character. The basic picture starts with a challenge to each and every one of us to improve ourselves and to extend the scope of our moral concern from ourselves and our immediate family and friends to

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<sup>2</sup> The Chinese surveillance system is especially tuned to search for and keep records of the comings and goings of Uighurs, which makes it an especially despicable example of automated racism and religious persecution. In this essay, though, we are interested in the broader issue of the government applying technology to watch its citizens in general, which it most certainly does.

<sup>3</sup> One might object that there is an external objective sense of face—the perceived benefit or harm to the state—but this is not a broadly conceived and complex view that arises naturally from social norms, expectations, and experiences, but is, instead, narrowly conceived, devised, and imposed by the party. As we shall go on to argue, the reliance on AI increasingly removes the development, application, and enforcement of this ideal from the party as well.

neighbours; society; and, eventually, to “heaven, earth, and the myriad things.” The ultimate aim is to move from the individual to “all under heaven” and bring peace, prosperity, and happiness to all.<sup>4</sup> A central part of this process is working to raise the level of our awareness of and attentiveness to our own mental and psychological states—the need for people to be “watchful over themselves when alone” 君子慎其獨<sup>5</sup>—which is, roughly, a call to be vigilantly aware of one’s thoughts and feelings with an eye toward moral improvement. However, under the unrelenting gaze of mass surveillance, we are almost never alone, and thereby we are robbed of the opportunity to set out on the Way by cultivating the ability to monitor our own thoughts and feelings and regulate, order, augment, and enhance them in an ongoing effort to cultivate ourselves. We are, instead, perpetually looking out, over our shoulders, and trying to predict, match, and game the criteria and standards established for us by the party. Under such circumstances, core Confucian moral ideals such as attaining “sincerity” (*cheng* 誠) and a proper sense of shame (*chi* 恥) are no longer encouraged or even possible. Instead of looking within to understand, assess, and craft my thoughts and feelings in an ongoing effort to cultivate myself and craft my own sense of right and wrong, I am forced to make countless decisions with the aim of avoiding censure and sanctions and pleasing the state or, more precisely, its AI overseer. Under such conditions, almost inevitably, I lose track of what I actually believe and feel about goodness and virtue, and my own independent judgments about such matters lose motivational power.<sup>6</sup> Our inner personal responsibility for ourselves and our outer collective effort to understand, shape, and improve our shared social life are outsourced to the state, in particular to the party, and ultimately to an algorithm.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. Unforeseen Implications for the Party

Aside from the profound damage that the new mass surveillance does to traditional notions about face, there is an unforeseen implication for the party that betokens a general ethical concern about autonomous, intelligent machines. The CPC vigorously defends its program of mass surveillance by appealing to the purported benefits it brings to society, which typically include defending it against lurking and imminent threats of terrorism, crime, social unrest, decaying values, and undermining overall social “harmony.” As the vanguard of the proletariat, the party takes upon itself the task of determining what is best for society in regard to these and other goods and how to go about achieving optimal results. Whatever the merits of such arguments, the recent and increasing use of AI to run the party’s mass surveillance and related Social Credit System introduces a mechanism that is new to the state’s machinery and its underlying theoretical justification; for now, decisions about what constitutes threats to the state and what is in society’s best interest as well as how to go about achieving optimal results will more and more be controlled not by party members but by the autonomous and intelligent machines running the system. As we approach the goal of designing and constructing machines that are capable of artificial general intelligence, it is not at all clear why one would believe these machines will continue to choose and employ values, goals, and methods that are aligned with those of the party, and by that, of course, we mean the current ruling members of the party. It would appear that the present trajectory not only leaves the individual members of society out of the process of deciding and the challenge of taking responsibility for what kind of life they want to live, but will increasingly

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, chapter two of the *Great Learning*.

<sup>5</sup> See chapter one of the *Doctrine of the Mean*.

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Justin Tiwald for discussing the implications for and importance of sincerity within such a system and suggesting how to describe these.

<sup>7</sup> In a way, this transference can be seen as the technological solution to the political problem of having the party determine normative standards and behaviors. However, this is why, despite the brilliant efforts of thinkers such as Liu Xiaoli, one cannot successfully graft Marxist theory onto the Confucian tradition. David S. Nivison offers an insightful exploration of this general problem. See (Nivison 1954).

make the party and its leadership superfluous as well. The state may indeed “wither away,” as Engels predicted,<sup>8</sup> but not in the way or with the consequences he described.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the idea of why and how the state will wither away, see (Kurian et al. 2010).

<sup>9</sup> The more general and even greater concern, of course, is that autonomous intelligent machines will no longer follow values aligned with the welfare of human beings at all. If such machines pursue their own interests, it is hard to see why they would devote resources to human welfare.