

# Guilt, Shame and Embarrassment: Revelations of Face and Self

## Commentary

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**Abstract** The authors derive evidence on guilt, shame and embarrassment from (a) Chinese and Japanese cultural data on expressions of emotion, (b) empirical studies of losing face, and (c) multilingual-multicultural clinical experiences. A scheme that has transcultural applicability is proposed for differentiating guilt, shame and embarrassment. The evidence supports the conclusion that these three emotions are marked by qualitatively different attributes. Probes into emotional life serve to reveal aspects of face and self. Face defined both as self presented to others, and as self perceived by others, mirrors the duality of self. Two methodological issues are discussed: what is meant by 'private experience'; and the need for an extended conception of selfhood.

**Key Words** Chinese, embarrassment, face, guilt, relationalism, self, shame

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## Guilt, Shame and Embarrassment: Revelations of Face and Self

Guilt, shame and embarrassment are universal emotions that are among the most painful of human experiences. Rich in psychological and anthropological meanings, they are intimately rooted in religion and ethics, conceived and experienced differently in different cultures and at different historical times within the same culture.

In allegorical terms, the Bible tells us how humankind experienced shame for the very first time. Originally Adam and Eve felt no shame for their nakedness. Eating the fruit of knowledge opened their eyes. Realizing they were naked, they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Later, they heard the sound of God, and hid from him among the trees. When God asked Adam where he was, he answered that he was afraid and hid because he was naked.

The biblical account provides little hint whether or not guilt was experienced; the emotions depicted were shame and fear. Humankind

required more time to internalize the voice of God and consolidate their conscience, through repeated cycles of transgression and awesome punishment (e.g. the great flood that drowned all of God's creatures on earth, except those saved in Noah's ark; the annihilation

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of Sodom and Gomorrah). Perhaps, then, shame is indeed older than guilt. In this connection, theorists of developmental psychology have also postulated that shame predates guilt—an instance of personal development recapitulating human history.

Christianity has shaped the understanding of guilt and shame in psychology and anthropology. A fuller understanding may profit from the perspectives of other traditions, religious or ethical. In this article, we intend to pursue three goals. First, we study guilt, shame and embarrassment from a Chinese cultural perspective, relying on evidence derived from cultural data on expressions of emotion and empirical studies of losing face. Secondly, using additional evidence abstracted from multilingual and multicultural clinical practice, we propose a scheme for differentiating guilt, shame and embarrassment that has transcultural applicability. Thirdly, we point out methodological implications for the study of emotions: how face and self reveal themselves in probes into emotional life. Two issues in particular are discussed in depth: the first concerns what is meant by a ‘private experience’; the second concerns the need for an extended conception of selfhood.

### **A Chinese Cultural Perspective**

According to the Christian understanding, guilt and shame originated from humankind’s first transgression against God’s command; they are consequences of original sin. Guilt and shame are thus intimately tied to the concept of sin—a deliberate transgression against the known will of God, resulting in estrangement from Him. This understanding differs from the Chinese on two main counts. Firstly, the Christian conception of sin is alien to Chinese culture; in particular, the notion of original sin runs counter to ancestral worship. Secondly, the biblical account of original sin has clear sexual overtones. Lust and sex are central to the doctrine of original sin. Augustine interpreted the shame Adam and Eve experienced about their nakedness as implicating willful activity on the part of their genitals (Tannahill, 1992, p. 142). Shame led them to sew fig leaves together to make aprons, to conceal what had come to be called pudenda (human external genitalia, especially of a woman; from the Latin *pudere*, meaning to cause shame). In contrast, the Confucian tradition accepts sexuality per se as part of human nature. However, sexual activities outside the bounds of propriety are condemned. A more complete acceptance of sexuality is found in Daoism, which views sexual activity as a natural manifestation of the yin-yang cosmic principle.

Yielding to Chinese sensibilities, here is perhaps an account of the human primogenitors' fall given in their own words.

Running naked around, delightful to behold—  
For nothing is hidden from his view—  
In our innocent state, united in one flesh,  
Happy, no shame or guilt, surely it was  
A blissful time; save we didn't know how  
To consummate the command, 'Be fruitful  
And multiply' until the fruit gave us  
Knowledge to know each other as man and wife.  
Eyes opened, we knew our naked state,  
The first experience of shame. In fear, in vain,  
We hid ourselves; in childlike honesty,  
We confessed to our transgression. Paradise lost—  
Self-consciousness gained—never to eat  
The fruit of the tree of life, immortality denied!  
What justice condemned our children, for a wrong  
They did not do, stigmatized to be born  
With original sin-repugnant to our Chinese descendants,  
Who worship their ancestors, of whom we rank  
Utmost-in all the generations that followed?

(unpublished verse by the first author)

Given the Confucian ethical tradition grounded in interpersonal relationships, rather than in the human person's relationship with God, how would the emotions of guilt, shame and embarrassment be experienced differently? We use two sources of evidence: Chinese and Japanese cultural data on expressions of emotion (especially facial); and empirical studies of losing face.

### **Cultural Data on Expressions of Emotion**

#### *Linguistic Data*

In Chinese and Japanese, a wealth of linguistic data pertaining to countenance, emotions and *mianzi* (face in a figurative sense, as in losing face) abounds. Wang and Fischer (1994) have tabulated more than 150 words for varieties of guilt, shame and embarrassment in Chinese, but only a few dozen at most in English.

The English word 'red-faced' has a Chinese equivalent *lianhong* (literally 'face-red'); both suggest a connection between emotion and physiological change. 'Shame-faced' hints at an intimate connection between shame and facial expression. We now explore these connections further in Chinese and Japanese. The word *yan* has several meanings: color, face, complexion and countenance (also the obsolete meaning of forehead or part of the face around the eyes). It appears in

many expressions pertaining to countenance, shame or *mianzi* in both idiomatic and colloquial Chinese. Examples are *yanmian* (literally ‘color-face’, meaning countenance; another meaning is *mianzi*); *yanhou* (literally ‘face-thick’, meaning brazen-faced; equivalent to *houlianpi*, literally ‘thick-face-skin’); and *hanyan wudi* (so ashamed as to sweat over the face and having no place to hide). Other expressions reflect a reliance on visual cues from observing someone else’s countenance for guidance in how to respond socially. The colloquial expression *gei lianse bieren kan* means letting another person see one’s ‘face-color’, displeasure or contempt; the recipient may then be in an unenviable situation of having to *kan renjia de lianse* (look at someone else’s face-color).

The Chinese character *chi* (shame) is composed of two radicals, *er* (ear) and *xin* (heart). However, popular expressions typically relate the sense of shame to the visual rather than the auditory modality: *choufu jian jiaweng* (the shameful daughter-in-law who, her adultery having been discovered, goes to see her father-in-law); and *meiyou lian jian ren* (having no face to meet people). These expressions clearly reflect an intimate association between shame and the avoidance of meeting people in the eye. The term *mianmu* combines the characters *mian* (face) and *mu* (eye); *wumianmu* (literally ‘no face-eye’) means losing face.

In Japanese, we find an abundance of words and phrases that correspond closely in meaning to their Chinese counterparts. The words for face are *men* and *kao*. Written in kanji, *men* is the same as the Chinese character *mian*; *kao* is the same as the Chinese character *yan*, with its connotations of color and complexion. *Kao* or *men* appears in expressions referring to losing face, as in *kao ga tatanai*, *kao ga tsubureru*, *memboku nai* and *taimen o kegasu*. The word for shame is *haji*; in kanji, it is the same as the Chinese character *chi*. Of particular interest are words and phrases that relate (a) shame or embarrassment to blushing (*kao o akarameru*, get red in the face; *sekimen suru*); and (b) shameless-ness to being brazen-faced (*kogan muchi*, brazen-faced and shameless— equivalent to *houyan wuchi* in Chinese, literally ‘thick-face-no-shame’; *tetsumempi*), or to being thick-skinned (*tsura no kawa ga atsui*). Finally, *akahaji* refers to open or public shame.

Captured in the linguistic data are close associations between shame and facial expression or visual exposure. Clearly, they locate the experiences of shame and losing face in the visual modality, in which an audience is present or implied. These experiences find their parallels in social practice. Public shaming is instrumental to socialization and is a potent sanction. For instance, shaming through public humiliation (e.g. wearing a dunce’s cap) is a common practice in Confucian societies. Criminals are sometimes paraded in the streets; a more

merciful practice is to allow them to cover their heads with paper bags and prevent having their faces publicly exposed.

*Confucian Classics*

Confucian classics give the impression that there is little or no room for the spontaneous expression of emotions—in contrast to vernacular expressions, which depict a richer, less constrained and more realistic emotional life. Still, the classics are informative, in that sensitivity to facial expressions in regulating social interaction has been emphasized since ancient times. The *Analects* (see also the *Book of Rites*, also known as the *Record of Rituals*) contains a number of references to regulating one's own countenance as well as observing those of others for proper conduct. The *junzi* (man of cultivation) regulates his countenance to keep near to trustworthiness (Book 8) and observes the countenance of others (Book 12). Subordinates who stand in service to the *junzi* are liable to err when they speak without having first looked at their superior's countenance (Book 16). Confucius himself changes his speech and countenance (and other nonverbal behaviors) depending on authority relations and the demands of propriety under differing circumstances (Book 10).

*Masks, Lianpu and Identity*

Theatrical performances mirror real life, and hence constitute a treasure-trove for the study of emotional expression. In traditional Chinese and Japanese drama, we may see clearly the force of cultural prescription over individual action. The Japanese word *men*, as noted above, means face, but it can also mean mask. Some masks worn by the main actors in Noh drama can convey various shades of emotion, depending on the angle at which they are tilted in relation to the lighting. Acting follows a highly restrained and stylized convention. Emotions are suggested rather than displayed. In Chinese drama, painting the faces of theatrical actors according to formal convention is known as *lianpu*. It has two components: *lianxing* (facial shape) and *lianse* (facial color). *Lianpu* signifies the identity of individual characters. By looking at the painted faces, the audience can tell the approximate age, social position and moral character of each. Inner emotions find expression only through painted faces, and must in addition conform to role requirements. Portrayal of individuality and characterization are thus constrained. All these are formidable barriers an actor has to transcend to demonstrate his unique artistry. The implication of *lianpu* boils down to this: just as identity is defined by *lianpu* on stage, it is inseparable from the social position one occupies and the role one plays in real life.

*Emotional Control*

The Western literature has focused primarily on the expression of emotions. We submit that concealment, non-expression and deceptive expression deserve no less research attention. In any society emotional expressions have to be regulated by external demands. To this extent, internal emotional states have to be subjugated, and spontaneous expressions circumscribed. In Confucian societies, the demands of classic propriety and protocol are severe. Given a rigidly hierarchical, authoritarian social order, authority and role relationships, rather than individual sentiments, are potent determinants of what and how emotions may be expressed. Those in superior positions have to maintain tight control, because they are expected to meet stricter demands of propriety and protocol. For those in inferior positions, controlling emotional expressions serves a defensive function. Tight control is necessary for protecting one's safety—in the form of non-expression. To show one's emotions outwardly risks invoking the displeasure of superiors. Such danger was most acute in Tokugawa Japan, when the samurai's right of *kirisute* ('cutting down and leaving' a commoner showing disrespect on the spot), at least in theory, might be exercised. A person in an inferior position has to show modesty; for him, it is a necessity. But a person in a superior position gains greater face for himself when he acts in a modest manner.

Affective manifestations of inauthenticity and deception are captured in many Chinese vernacular expressions: a *xiaomienhu* ('smiling-face tiger') is like a wolf cloaked in sheep's clothing; *xiaoli cangdau* (concealing a dagger behind the smile), like velvet paws hiding sharp claws, is outright dangerous; and *pi xiao rou bu xiao* (smiling with the skin, but not the flesh) suggests a detection of forced, incongruent affect and aversion toward the inauthenticity it betrays. These derogatory expressions reflect at once the lack of *zhenqing* (genuine feelings), and the need to be on guard against hypocrisy or deception. Typically, they apply to affective manifestations by strangers or people who cannot be trusted. Thus, caution must be exercised in perceiving other people's emotional expressions to avoid misreading, committing blunders or being deceived. In contrast, the comfort in *zhenqing* one longs for may be found in trusting and intimate relationships. In large measure, then, emotional life is relationship-specific, in terms of both perception and expression.

We interpret this as another instance of relationship dominance in Confucian societies. Relationship dominance refers to the potency of interpersonal relationships, relative to personality and situational factors, as a determinant of social actions (Ho, Peng, Lai, & Chan, 2001).

Where relationships predominate, social actions follow not so much from the individual's own volition, sentiments or needs as they do from the individual's perception of his or her relationships with other people.

### **Losing Face**

The idea of face is Chinese in origin. Social scientists have distinguished two Chinese concepts of face, based on two different sets of judgmental criteria: *mianzi*, achieved through success and ostentation; and *lian*, which represents the confidence of society in the integrity of one's moral character (Ho, 1994). In Chinese as well as Japanese, the idea of losing face is expressed in numerous expressions. It is ambiguous as to which one of the two judgmental criteria is entailed in these expressions, or whether both are, unless the circumstances under which face is lost are made explicit.

We define losing face as a damaging social event, in which one's action is publicly given notice and negatively judged by others, resulting in a loss of moral or social standing (cf. Ho, 1994). This definition embodies several key elements. Losing face is damaging because failure to maintain or protect one's face has adverse implications for social functioning. The term 'event' is used because its occurrence is discrete and momentary: losing face is not a continual process in which the actor's face is gradually eroded. The event is public because an audience, real or implied, is required and is collectively observed. It involves evaluative judgments, not by the actor himself, but about the actor by others. In short, losing face is a public, discrete and damaging social event for the actor concerned.

Accordingly, losing face does not, in itself, refer to a private emotion. However, the actor's experience of losing face is commonly, though not necessarily, accompanied by dysphoric emotions. We say 'not necessarily' because an actor may play the game of face with emotional detachment; the degree of ego involvement is low. It is also possible that the actor is in denial, and does not consciously experience, let alone acknowledge, his or her loss of face. This generates strain in interpersonal relationships, and a likely outcome for the actor is to have more occasions for losing face (Ho, 1994).

Empirical studies have found a variety of dysphoric emotions in losing face among Chinese participants. Chu (1983) finds that threats to one's face may result in an admixture of dysphoric emotions such as feeling oppressed, anxious, angry, ashamed and guilty. Bedford (2004) reports that *diulian* (losing face) may encompass feelings of guilt, shame or both. Lau, Chiu and Ho (1997) find that *diulian* is commonly accompanied by embarrassment, flushing, wanting to hide, feeling



inhibited, inferior, self-conscious or exposed. Clearly, the range of emotions goes far beyond the rubric of embarrassment—a focal emotion studied in Western research of facework.

In the study by Lau et al. (1997), four groups of participants took part. Each group was asked to recall a recent event involving an experience belonging to the following categories: lost face, almost lost face, embarrassed and almost embarrassed. The participants were also asked to indicate whether they reported a physiological reaction (blushing), and which of the phenomenological reactions (e.g. being laughed at) and behavioral intentions (e.g. wanting to hide) on a checklist described how they felt at the time of the event. Results showed that proportionally more participants in the lost face group reported feeling embarrassed than vice versa. There were no differences between the lost face and the embarrassed groups in physiological reaction (i.e. blushing) and behavioral intentions (e.g. wanting to hide, make restitution, hit other people, reward other people or be submissive). However, group differences were found in the perception of agency, that is, whether one has affected, or is capable of affecting, the situation in question. Relative to the lost face group, more of the participants in the embarrassed group perceived themselves as playing an active role in the recalled event, feeling surprised, and being accepted by those who were present. Thus, losing face and embarrassment can be differentiated in terms of the perception of agency. This conclusion was strengthened when differences were examined between the embarrassed and the almost embarrassed groups, and between the lost face and the almost lost face groups.

Lau et al. (1997) also obtained data on losing face and embarrassment in terms of their affinity to different emotions (e.g. shame, guilt, humiliation). Cluster analysis located losing face and fear in the same cluster; embarrassment and being insulted were located in another. Adopting a two-dimensional solution for a multidimensional scaling analysis, embarrassment and losing face were found to be located in the same quadrant. However, embarrassment was not as close as shame was to losing face on both dimensions. Additional analysis revealed that, relative to embarrassment, losing face was more likely to co-occur with anguish, shame, humiliation, belittlement, anger, guilt and being insulted.

In unison, these results support two conclusions. Firstly, the emotions accompanying losing face are far more encompassing than embarrassment. In particular, guilt may also be experienced. Secondly, losing face has greater affinity to shame than to embarrassment.

## Differentiation of Guilt, Shame and Embarrassment

To go beyond the Chinese cultural perspective, we need to rely on other sources of evidence. Guilt, shame and embarrassment are emotions experienced; however, their expressions are often concealed from others. Accordingly, experience-near methods of investigation are most suitable, because they are capable of capturing experiential richness and complexity. In contrast, self-report measures (e.g. questionnaires, scales, inventories) that force participants to respond in abstract terms yield quantified abstractions rather than close representations of the experiences themselves. The most experience-near method comes in clinical practice, especially psychotherapy. Accordingly, we take advantage of the first author's clinical experiences that span decades in North America and Asia (Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and the Philippines). We supplement these experiences with cultural data embodied in literature, myths, legends, drama, idioms, vernacular expressions, sayings, and so forth. From these multilingual-multicultural data is obtained a distillate of phenomenological descriptions of guilt, shame and embarrassment.

Guilt, shame and embarrassment are terms meant to refer to different emotions; and refined conceptual distinctions that go beyond ordinary dictionary definitions may be made. However, researchers attempting to demonstrate distinctions in how people actually experience these emotions are likely to encounter formidable difficulties. Emotions share common features, and are rarely, if ever, experienced in pure form. People typically respond to social events with an admixture of emotions, with varying degrees of intensity and duration. Moreover, they tend to label the emotions they experience rather loosely. In a therapeutic context, clarification may be achieved—to an extent seldom possible in other contexts. Now we are more prepared to propose a scheme for differentiating guilt, shame and embarrassment along the dimensions of modality; morality; internalization and responsibility; audience presence; intensity and duration; and prescription for cure (see also Table 1).

### Modality

Guilt is primarily an imaginary auditory experience. We experience guilt when our conscience, our inner voice, speaks to us. In Shakespeare's *Richard III* (Act V, Scene iii, ll. 194-196), shame and embarrassment are marked by visual salience:

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,  
And every tongue brings in a several tale, And  
every tale condemns me for a villain.

Table 1. Differentiation of guilt, shame and embarrassment

Guilt	Shame and embarrassment
Modality	
Auditory salience	Visual salience
Morality, internalization and responsibility	
Moral	Moral or amoral
Internalization of external authority and moral values; fear of punishment or retaliation	Internalization of cultural standards; fear of being humiliated, ridiculed or laughed at Shame is experienced when the rejected self is activated; embarrassment touches the outer social self
Responsible for one's wrongful actions and failures	May or may not implicate personal responsibility
Audience presence: public-private	distinction
May occur with or without actual presence	May occur with or without actual presence Embarrassment less likely to occur when alone
Intensity and duration	
Intense	Most intense for shame, least intense and more momentary for embarrassment
Prescription for cure	
Confession, penance, self-denial, self-flagellation, atonement, reparation, doing menial work	Less certain and more difficult for shame Embarrassment requires no therapeutic intervention

This is supported by both the cultural data on emotional expressions and the evidence from empirical studies of losing face above. In the biblical account, Adam and Eve experienced shame in the visual mode. To this day, the state of nakedness, be it real, imaginary or implied, remains a prototype of shame. Thus, shame is commonly accompanied by the fear of being humiliated, ridiculed or laughed at, consequential to the exposure, real or imaginary, of one's weaknesses, failure, evil, in front of others. One feels vulnerable, stripped of one's persona.

I dreamt I was on stage, naked,  
In front of a thousand piercing eyes, staring at me.  
My face is a face that does not dare to show itself.  
Nowhere to hide, not even from myself.  
But what have I done wrong?

(unpublished verse by the first author)

Embarrassment is more likely than guilt, even shame, to be accompanied by physiological changes (e.g. blushing, increased heart rate),

and is closely related to the personality traits of bashfulness and shyness. A red-faced or *lian hong* reaction, which is less intense than a shame-faced reaction, is a telltale sign of embarrassment.

### **Morality, Internalization and Responsibility**

Actions, or intended actions, are essential to guilt. The judgmental-evaluative dimension underlying guilt is moral. Personal responsibility, direct or indirect, is involved. Guilt is experienced when acts of transgression are committed, or when forbidden thought and impulses are sensed—even when they are unknown to others. Acts of omission, no less than of commission, may activate guilty feelings. Guilt may also be experienced when performance fails to meet expectations, especially when personal responsibility is involved. The origin of conscience, and hence of guilt, is external authority and moral values internalized. Understandably, therefore, guilt is commonly accompanied by fears of punishment by authority figures or retaliation by adversaries more powerful than oneself. The conscience of the sufferer may be extraordinarily harsh, weighing like a shackle on the soul. Conscience torments, but does not guarantee good conduct. In literature, its deep connection with cowardice is revealed. Shakespeare observes, in *Hamlet* (Act III, Scene 1, l. 85), that conscience makes cowards of us all; in *Richard III* (Act V, Scene 3, ll. 310-311):

Conscience is but a word that cowards use,  
Devis'd at first to keep the strong in awe.

However, in a subject-object reversal, Oliver Goldsmith makes a pointed accusation in *The Vicar of Wakefield* (Ch. 13): 'Conscience is a coward, and those faults it has not strength enough to prevent it seldom has justice enough to accuse.'

Shame comes from the rejected self, which may reach into the core of one's being. Losing face, failures, rejection by others, and the like, activate self-rejection. The possible conditions leading to shame are much broader than in the case of guilt: one can feel ashamed of not only one's thoughts and actions, but also one's body (e.g. lack of attractiveness), incompetence (despite having tried one's best), humble condition in life, heritage and country. Thus, the judgmental-evaluative dimension underlying shame may be both moral and amoral. Because shame may be experienced in conditions over which we have no control, personal responsibility is not necessarily involved (e.g. suspected of having an illicit affair, a village girl jumps into a well and kills herself to clear her reputation).

Both shame and embarrassment originate from the internalization of

cultural standards (e.g. of beauty) that are more inclusive than morality. However, unlike shame, embarrassment touches the outer social self, but does not penetrate the inner private self. Neither morality nor responsibility is essential to embarrassment. The prototype of embarrassment is loss of poise or composure, equivalent to a minor loss of face, in face-to-face interactions.

This moral-amoral distinction has received mixed empirical support. Moral transgression leads to both guilt and shame, but personal incompetence leads to more shame among Chinese undergraduate students (Qian & Qi, 2002). Tangney Miller, Flicker and Barlow (1996) find, among undergraduates in the United States, no differences between guilt and shame in (a) the degree to which a moral standard has been violated, (b) sense of responsibility for what happened, or (c) motivation to make amends. However, further analysis supports the behavior versus self distinction: guilt is more likely to evoke undoing aspects of behavior; shame experiences are more likely to evoke undoing aspects of the self.

#### **Audience Presence: Public-Private Distinction**

Guilt, shame and embarrassment may occur with or without the actual presence of an audience. However, relative to embarrassment, guilt and shame are more likely to occur when alone. Imaginary, implied or actual presence (especially when one feels one is being stared at by onlookers) amplifies the intensity of shame or embarrassment. An implication of this differentiation may be derived: awareness that one's wrongdoing has been discovered by others is more likely to amplify feelings of shame or embarrassment than those of guilt. This amplification, itself amoral, comes from a change in the audience effect—from no presence to an implied presence of others.

This public-private distinction has also received mixed empirical support. Qian and Qi (2002) find that the presence of others is more likely to result in shame; guilt usually does not require the presence of others. However, Tangney et al. (1996) report relatively few differences in audience composition between guilt and shame events. Guilt, shame and embarrassment typically occur in social contexts, but a significant proportion of guilt and shame events occur when alone.

Another public-private distinction concerns the circumstances of the event resulting in shame or embarrassment itself. Being publicly accused, exposed or humiliated is likely to intensify these feelings. Worse, the event may lead to more rejection and humiliation inflicted by an enlarged circle of people, all too willing to participate in the fray; in addition, those who suffer may include not only the person

humiliated but also his or her family, friends, and associates. In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* we find passages describing how Dmitry Karamazov humiliated the Staff Captain publicly, in front of his son Ilusha and his schoolmates. After this incident, Ilusha's schoolmates started to tease him, throwing insults at him and his father. The whole family recoiled from its loss of honor.

### **Intensity and Duration**

Shame, guilt and embarrassment rank in a descending order of intensities. Guilt and shame are more enduring by far than embarrassment. Tangney et al. (1996) report that, compared with guilt, shame is a more intense and more dysphoric feeling that occurs more suddenly. Shame is accompanied by greater physiological changes (e.g. blushing, increased heart rate); feeling physically smaller, more inferior to others; a greater sense of isolation; a belief that others are angrier at one; a stronger urge to hide; less inclination to admit what one has done; and the wish to have acted differently. Embarrassment is the least negative and the most fleeting of the three emotions.

### **Prescription for Cure**

The prescription for curing guilt is: 'Make up for your wrongdoings, and pacify your conscience.' A variety of cultural prescriptions, both therapeutic and counter-therapeutic, are available: confession, penance, self-denial, self-flagellation, atonement, reparation and doing menial work (e.g. 'I feel less guilty after a day of hard labor').

The prescription for healing shame is less certain and more difficult. Shame is potentially more pervasive and incapacitating than guilt. It often persists like a psychic scar that stubbornly refuses to heal. In sharp contrast, embarrassment requires no therapeutic intervention. It will go away by itself, when composure is restored.

A case of humiliation between two friends may serve as an illustration. The one who humiliates may reduce his guilty feelings by apologizing to the other; the one humiliated may reduce his shame (or restore his honor) by demanding an apology.

### **Cultural Variation**

Attention has already been drawn to the fact that linguistic representation of guilt, shame and embarrassment is far richer in Chinese than in English (Wang & Fischer, 1994). In this respect, Chinese people are better equipped to make refined discriminations between nuances of these emotions. Of great interest are transcultural studies of emotional categorization (e.g., Shaver, Wu, & Schwartz, 1992) showing that shame

appears as a basic emotion family in China, but not in the United States and Italy.

Evidence from diverse sources supports the contention that shame is a salient emotion in Confucian societies. Avoiding shame is of overriding concern—as is the avoidance of losing face, rather than gaining face (Ho, 1994). This underlies the dynamics of social interaction in which avoiding disapproval, rejection, ostracism, is a stronger social motive than seeking approval, acceptance or popularity—a reversal of the pattern found in American society.

Another cultural variation concerns the involvement of others in terms of intensity and extensity. In Confucian societies, others' involvement tends to be both intense and extensive. Each partakes in the pride of the collectivity, and bears its humiliation. Recent media coverage of the first Chinese astronaut to venture into outer space shows clearly how he bore a heavy burden: failure would have resulted in a collective loss of face. As it turned out, his success, far from personal, brought pride to the Chinese people as a whole.

Status ranking is an important determinant. A person, no matter how humble in origin, may bring pride to the group. However, collective shame intensifies when the leader, upon whom the group's reputation hinges, is humiliated. This is because the leader represents not just an individual, but the embodiment of the group's collective good. In general, the higher the status of the humiliated person within the group, the greater the intensity is likely to be. For instance, one would experience greater shame when one's father, compared with one's son, is humiliated. (Recall, in this connection, the tormented mind of young Ilusha, consequential to his father's humiliation, in *The Brothers Kara-mazov*. Its poignancy transcends cultural boundaries.)

These cultural differences in linguistic representation, action orientation (approval seeking vs disapproval avoidance) and others' involvement may account for the apparent inconsistencies, such as those noted above between results reported by Qian and Qi (2002) and those by Tangney et al. (1996).

### **Methodological Implications**

We discern an emerging paradigmatic shift in the social sciences: from methodological individualism to methodological relationalism. Revisiting the debate about the place of the individual in the understanding and explanation of social phenomena, we argue that a social science predicated on methodological individualism is fundamentally ill equipped to reflect the complexities involved. Grounded in dialectics,

methodological relationalism is a general conceptual framework for the analysis of thought and action (Ho et al., 2001). It is informed by Asian views reflecting the omnipresence of self-other relations in all social life. It has, however, universal applicability, because actions always take place in relational (e.g. interpersonal, individual-group, intergroup) contexts, regardless of socioeconomic or cultural variations. We now apply methodological relationalism to an analysis of emotions.

In the Western literature, emotions in general are regarded as private experiences; guilt, shame and embarrassment in particular are thought of as self-conscious emotions (e.g. Tangney et al., 1996). We argue that this conception, rooted in methodological individualism, is in need of revision. Two issues in particular invite scrutiny. The first concerns what is meant by a 'private experience'; the second concerns the need for an extended conception of selfhood.

### **Private Experiences Are Not Entirely Private**

How private is a private experience? Of course, emotions are experienced privately by individuals. However, as our account of emotional expressions in Confucian societies above shows, emotional life is not an individual matter. The circumstances that induce emotions, the manner in which they are construed, expressed and perceived, and the consequences that follow from their expression are anything but private. They are a function of relational contexts, especially authority and role relationships, within which the individual is embedded. Accordingly, we argue for a relational conception of emotions and their significance in social interaction—in not only Confucian but also other societies as well. Moreover, a relational conception can better account for cultural variation in the circumstances, construals, perceptions, expressions and consequences that pertain to emotions.

Delving into emotional life requires recognition of the distinction between the public-outward and the private-inward facets of social behavior. This distinction is paramount in Confucian societies. Doi (1973) depicts the Japanese two-fold structure of consciousness in terms of *omote* (outside part) and *ura* (backside part). In investigating Japanese *tatemaie* (public moral standards) and *honne* (true inner feelings), Naito and Gielen (1992) conclude that 'the *tatemaie-honne* dualism creates difficulties for adolescents and moral educators, and interferes with effective cross-cultural communication' (p. 161). In Chinese culture, a corresponding dualism would be acting according to external standards (e.g. *liyi*, which means protocol and righteousness) versus internal *zhenqing* (genuine feelings). This dualism reflects



a tension between cultural prescription and individual volition, needs and feelings. A psychological mechanism in response to this tension is affect-role dissociation, which makes it possible for one to perform one's role functions with affective detachment (Ho et al., 2001).

When emotions are publicly expressed, where an audience is present or implied, observations are a function of the interpersonal context in which they are made. In different contexts, different facets of emotion, the public-outward versus the private-inward, may be revealed. Again, this drives home the point that private experiences are not entirely private. We argue further that this assertion holds in any cultural context.

This necessitates a field conception of social interaction (Ho, 1994; Ho et al., 2001): Actions may be active or reactive, self-initiated or other-initiated, direct (aimed at a specific target) or indirect (aimed at people associated with that target). An actor may experience guilt, shame or embarrassment arising from (a) his own direct or indirect actions (active, self-initiated, entailing individual responsibility); (b) direct or indirect actions initiated by others associated with him (active, other-initiated, entailing collective responsibility); and (c) reactions to the actions of others directed at himself or at people associated with him (reactive, direct or indirect).

### **An Extended Conception of Selfhood**

The second issue concerns the conception of guilt, shame and embarrassment as self-conscious emotions. The capacity for self-consciousness has long been regarded as a necessary condition for the emergence of selfhood. Ho et al. (2001) argue that the capacity for other-consciousness is no less a necessary condition. Self and other imply each other— an idea dating back to Daoist thought in ancient China. Self-consciousness and other-consciousness, like twins, are conceived together, marking a quantum leap in the evolution of consciousness. In addition, the capacity for metacognition is vital to the development of the social self.

Our relational analysis employs self and face as reciprocal constructs. Two approaches to the definition of face should be made explicit (Ho, 1994). First, face may be defined in terms of the projection of one's self in the public domain: that is, aspects of one's self (including one's self-perceptions and metaperceptions) that a person reveals to others. Face is self presented to others. Second, face may be defined in terms of one's social image that is publicly and collectively perceived by others (including their perceptions of one's self-perception, i.e. what other people think of what one thinks of oneself). Face is self seen

through the eyes of others. These are two different approaches to definition, and hence to measurement.

The face (in the sense of compliance, respect, deference) that a person expects or claims for himself from others should be distinguished from the face accorded him by others. Correspondingly, one's social self is not necessarily congruent with one's social image. Such discrepant perceptions are a source of strain in self-other relationships. Thus the social 'presence' of others, real, imagined or implied, has to be entered into social calculations. Moreover, this process is bidirectional: one assumes that one's own presence is taken into consideration by others; in the same way one also assumes that others assume that their presence is considered by oneself. Reciprocity is thus a fundamental feature of social interaction essential to the development of selfhood. Developing a methodology to reflect reciprocity is crucial to theory advancement. Because all actors are both percipient subjects and objects of perception, two approaches to measurement of a target actor are complementary: one focusing on social self, with the actor serving as informant or respondent; and the other on social image, with others serving as informants.

We may use the metaphor of a barbershop mirror as an analogy of the self taking a look at itself, and being looked at by itself, *ad infinitum*. In this regard, mirrors are a popular symbol in the East and the West alike. Adding the presence of others in the barbershop mirror captures more fully the richness of the self-concept. The concept of face reflects the dual aspects of self: what one reveals to others, and what is perceived by others. Duality is inherent in both constructs. However, self is not reducible to face. Our definition of face logically excludes the portion of the self that is neither revealed to nor perceived by others. That portion, the private self, is known only to oneself. But there is no necessity that the composition of 'others' remains constant. Face changes as a function of self-other relations: it is always interpersonal, never intrapersonal. So does the private self: what is revealed to or perceived by others is no longer private. Again, the private self is not entirely private.

Traditionally, Western theories of selfhood have been predicated on a demarcation between self and other. Confronting this demarcation demands an extended conception of selfhood. The construction of self-in-relations by Ho et al. (2001) strives to meet two requirements: (a) inclusion of both self-in-other and other-in-self, and (b) to be faithful to a conception of human nature that gives full recognition to the whole range of capabilities and potentialities unique to humans (e.g. metacognition). It treats cognitive complexity in terms of the degree of

perceptions or cognitive construals identified. Thus, self-perceptions, other-perceptions (i.e. perceptions of other people) and perceptions of relationships are first-degree perceptions; metaperceptions are second-degree perceptions; perceptions of metaperceptions are third-degree perceptions; and so forth. In short, any perception may be itself the object of a higher degree perception.

This results in an expanded self-concept that includes components at various degrees of perception (Table 2). Each component, together with its associated emotion, may be measured. Thus conceived, the self-concept is clearly more encompassing than has been customarily envisioned. It is a dynamic construct reflecting tensions between component perceptions, which play a pivotal role in the development of the social self. These tensions activate emotional responses, with more potency than self-perceptions alone. An extended conception of self-conscious emotions is clearly indicated. It resonates with current thought on the self-reflective nature of consciousness.

Ho et al. (2001) have also introduced the construct of directionality in constructing the self-in-relation. Directionality may be applied to assess balance-imbalance between how one regards others versus how

Table 2. Components of the self-concept and associated emotional responses at different degrees of perception

Components of perception	Examples of associated emotion
<b>First-degree perception</b>	
What one thinks of oneself (self-perception)	I am ashamed of my body
Perception of how one reveals to others (social self)	I am shy in front of a large audience
Perception of what one does not reveal to others (private self)	I am ashamed of the dark side of myself
What one thinks of others (other-perception)	I feel embarrassed about my brother's behavior
Perception of relationships	I feel guilty about having caused poor relationships among my peers
<b>Second-degree perception</b>	
Self-reflection on one's own self-perceptions	I feel greater shame upon reflecting that I am ashamed of my body
Self-reflection on one's other-perceptions embarrassed about my brother's behavior	I feel guilty when I realize that I feel
Perception of one's social image (i.e., of how others perceive oneself)	I feel ashamed that other people see me as a failure
Perception of how others perceive one's significant others	I feel ashamed that other people look down on my parents

one is regarded by others emotionally. Marital relationships serve as an illustration. Suppose the husband feels embarrassed about his wife's behavior, but the wife does not feel embarrassed about his—an instance of directional imbalance. Furthermore, the wife does not feel embarrassed about her own behavior and hence there is no such self-conscious emotion—an instance of discrepant self-directed versus other-directed emotions. Note, however, that the wife may feel embarrassed about her husband's embarrassment about her behavior—an instance of 'self-conscious' emotion that is induced by another's.

### Conclusion

Our proposed scheme represents a step toward differentiating how people in diverse cultures actually experience guilt, shame and embarrassment. These emotions appear to be marked by qualitatively different attributes; to this extent, they may be regarded as distinct. This general conclusion is supported by empirical results (e.g. Bedford, 2004; Qian & Qi, 2002; Tangney et al., 1996). We have identified some major cultural variations in how guilt, shame and embarrassment are perceived and expressed: linguistic representation, action orientation (approval seeking vs disapproval avoidance) and others' involvement in terms of intensity and extensity

Probes into emotional life serve as avenues through which face and self may be more deeply understood. We conceive of face and self as reciprocal constructs. Face mirrors the duality of self: it may be defined both as self presented to others, and as self seen through the eyes of others. Our relational analysis leads to two major methodological implications. The first is that private experiences are not entirely private. The second is the need for an extended conception of selfhood.

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