Face in cross-cultural political discourse

JOHN FLOWERDEW

Abstract

Sino-British Hong Kong relations during the final troubled five years of British rule in the former British colony provide the context for this case study in cross-cultural political discourse analysis. Application of a model of Chinese face proposed by Bond and Hwang (1986) provides a means for explaining certain aspects of the breakdown in communication that occurred between the Chinese and British Hong Kong governments during that period. The study contributes to an understanding of an important real-world issue, while demonstrating the explanatory power of Bond and Hwang's model. At the same time, the study highlights problems with 'universal' models of face because of their lack of emphasis on cultural relativity.

Keywords: Hong Kong; discourse; face; cross-cultural discourse; political discourse; international relations.

Studies of cross-cultural discourse provide opportunities for investigating real-world issues and communication problems, on the one hand, while adding to our knowledge about important theoretical constructs in discourse theory, on the other (Tannen 1985). This article, which presents a case study of Sino-British relations over Hong Kong, has as its twin goals the development of our understanding of a difficult historical period in the relationship between two countries, while at the same time testing the applicability of a theory of cross-cultural communication—that of face—to a field—that of international relations—where it is not normally applied. Acknowledging the universality of the notion of face, the article argues the need for such models to allow for cultural relativism.

The field of international relations is in many ways the foremost context within which to study cross-cultural communication. When representatives of countries with different languages, cultures, and modes of
communicating come together to reconcile their differences the stakes can be very high and miscommunication can have tragic results (Tannen 1985). From a discourse analysis point of view, the study of international relations is made difficult by the fact that most diplomatic negotiations take place behind closed doors and remain confidential. At best, discourse analysts can piece together diplomatic encounters, based on second-hand accounts. However, diplomacy takes place on many levels besides that of direct negotiation between governments, and one important level is that of the mass media. Governments may seek to influence the governments of other countries and public opinion, both at home and abroad, with such devices as public statements and 'off-the-record' briefings for journalists, which are then reported in the media. The situation during the final years of British administration of Hong Kong is a fruitful research site in this respect, because direct relations between the British Hong Kong government under its leader, Chris Patten, and representatives of the Chinese government—with the exception of one meeting—were never established, as a result of Patten's unilateral introduction of constitutional reforms at the beginning of his governorship in 1992. At the same time, however, a virulent campaign of 'megaphone diplomacy' was conducted through the media, a form of dialogue which can be productively analysed from a cross-cultural discourse perspective.

**Chris Patten and Sino-British Hong Kong relations**

From the beginning of the negotiations leading to the signing of the Joint Declaration in 1984 and agreement on the transfer of sovereignty, British policy on Hong Kong was managed by a group of Foreign Office officials under the leadership of Sir Percy Cradock. As sinologists, these men took a conciliatory line in their dealings with the Chinese government. They believed Britain to be in a very weak negotiating position as far as the future of Hong Kong was concerned because the lease which granted Britain sovereignty over the major part of the territory was due to run out in 1997 and at that point China would be free to do what it wanted, whatever the British government might have felt. British policy was to obtain the best deal possible for Hong Kong, but in the belief that ultimately, in the words of Cradock (1994: 211), 'the Chinese held virtually all the cards'.

During the transitional period between the signing of the Joint Declaration and the handover in 1997, Sino-British negotiations focused on the pace of the constitutional development which had been offered to Hong Kong as a future Special Administrative Region of China with a high degree of autonomy. The history of this period, under the
governorship of Sir David Wilson, was of British acquiescence to a
gradual erosion of the democratic development which Britain would have
liked to have seen introduced.

In 1992, however, following a general election, the British Prime
Minister, John Major, replaced the Hong Kong governor, Sir David
Wilson, with someone who was neither a diplomat nor a sinologist, Chris
Patten, a former cabinet minister and close personal friend of Major's. In
early 1992, while organising the Conservative general election victory in
his capacity as chairman of the Conservative Party, Patten had lost his
own parliamentary seat and was thus free to take up the Hong Kong
posting.

The contrast between Patten and his predecessor, Wilson, could not
have been greater. Wilson had devoted his life to the study of China, its
language and culture. Patten, on the other hand, on his own admission,
knew nothing of China and never made any effort to learn the language.
There was a feeling in the British government that the accommodating
stance of the Foreign Office mandarins and their stranglehold on Britain's
policy on China had led to humiliating setbacks for Britain. As Cradock
(1994: 250) himself notes, the Foreign Office sinologists
came to occupy a leading role in the demonology of the time. They were alleged to
be so besotted with things Chinese, or alternatively, so overawed by China, that
they surrendered automatically to Peking's demands, or even, by anticipation,
before the demands were formulated. 'Pre-emptive cringe' was a phrase much
employed.

A decision was therefore taken by Britain to switch away from the
policy of accommodation and become more assertive, even at the risk of
confrontation with China.

In selecting Chris Patten, former speechwriter for Margaret Thatcher,
cabinet minister, and chairman of the Conservative party, the British
government had chosen someone with very good credentials for the job.
Patten was a heavyweight politician used to the cut and thrust of
parliamentary politics. As environment minister under Thatcher, he had
to introduce a hugely unpopular poll tax and had to confront angry
opposition, both inside and outside Parliament—including street riots—to
the plans he was introducing.

In stark contrast to previous governors, Patten presented himself in
Hong Kong as open and accountable and willing to speak out. On arrival
in Hong Kong in his swearing-in speech he stated that he had 'no hidden
agendas', and that 'if you want to know what I believe, if you want to
know what I think, and if you want to know what I intend to do, read what
I say and listen to what I say'. He also said that he 'had no secret agenda'
and that his only agenda was ‘the one I have laid before you today. It is clear. It is public. And so it will remain’ (Patten 1992a). In his speeches, he consistently said that he would seek to ‘stand up for Hong Kong against China’. Although in his swearing-in speech he said that he sought co-operation with China, he also stated that this was on condition that ‘trust is a two-way street’, and in both his swearing-in speech and his first major policy speech he listed co-operation with China as the last of his priorities, where his predecessor, Wilson, had always put it first (Patten 1992a, 1992b).

During the three month period from his arrival in Hong Kong in July 1992 to his first policy speech in October Patten refused invitations to visit Beijing, saying that his first responsibility was to the people of Hong Kong and that he would visit Beijing after his speech. The Chinese government was concerned about the political reform plan he was preparing concerning arrangements which needed to be made for elections in 1994 and 1995. China and Britain had engaged in close consultation on all previous electoral arrangements and China was concerned that Patten had abandoned this policy of prior consultation. When Patten announced his plans in the October speech he said that they were ‘for discussion’. However, having been excluded from consultation beforehand, China refused to co-operate. Shortly after the announcement of his proposals Patten made his one and only visit to Beijing, but a six-hour meeting with the head of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office, Lu Ping (Patten’s opposite number in the Chinese government), resulted in no agreement and was followed by a press conference held by the Chinese side in which Lu launched the first of what were to prove to be many personal attacks on Patten, stating that the Hong Kong governor’s approach left China with no option but to participate in the confrontation which he had started (Dimbleby 1997a, 1997b: 153–154).

In subsequent months Patten was to be subjected to a continuous tirade of such attacks from Chinese officials, the official Chinese media, and the China-backed press in Hong Kong. Epithets used to refer to the Hong Kong governor included ‘a man to be cursed by history for a thousand years’, ‘a whore’, ‘a shyster’, ‘a snake’, ‘a robber’, ‘a thief’, ‘a prostitute’, and ‘a tango dancer’. Patten’s understanding in putting forward his reform proposals ‘for discussion’ was that some sort of compromise between what he was suggesting and what China wanted would be the outcome (Dimbleby 1997b). When, after many months of megaphone diplomacy via the media, talks did begin about his proposals, 17 rounds of negotiations were conducted with no agreement being arrived at. China insisted that Patten withdraw the essential provisions of his proposed arrangements, while Britain and Patten insisted they had a ‘bottom line’
Face in cross-cultural political discourse

Beyond which it would not go in any compromise (Flowerdew 1997a, 1998).

As a result of this impasse, Patten went ahead with his original reforms, while China set up its own ‘shadow government’ which in 1997 would replace the legislature elected under Patten’s arrangements. During this interim period of an appointed legislature, revised electoral arrangements would be made.

Accusations concerning Patten’s insensitivity to Chinese face

During the period preceding and following the transfer of Hong Kong from British to Chinese rule in June 1997 there was considerable controversy over the confrontational policy pursued by the British under the governorship of Patten. According to Patten’s own reading and that of his supporters, by standing up to China two objectives were achieved. First, Britain was able to withdraw from Hong Kong honorably, having done its best, if belatedly, to introduce more democracy in the face of Chinese intransigence. Second, a more accommodating stance towards China would have given China all it wanted anyway; at least in pushing through his reforms Patten had given Hong Kong people a taste of democracy which would encourage them to stand up for more in the longer term.

According to Patten’s critics and the pro-Beijing camp, who wanted a smooth transition of sovereignty above all else, Patten’s period of office as governor was a disaster, creating five years of confrontation when Hong Kong should have been learning how to cooperate with China in preparation for the reversion of sovereignty. Patten made two vital errors of judgement according to these critics, first, in expecting China to come to some sort of compromise on his reform proposals, and second, in imagining that China would not dare dismantle his reforms once they had been presented as a fait accompli and it had been demonstrated that they were operating smoothly (Dimbleby 1997a, 1997b).

Many of those commentators who were critical of Patten’s performance attributed what they saw as his failure to his lack of knowledge of China and how to deal with the Chinese. These commentators invariably referred to Patten’s inability or unwillingness to consider China’s sense of face. ‘To him [Patten], taking a confrontational approach may not necessarily hurt the face or feelings of Chinese officials’, as one writer put it (Cheng 1993). Another writer described the reactions to Patten’s performance of those used to dealing with China in the following terms.
The cognoscenti attuned to reading between the Beijing lines suggest that the governor’s fundamental mistake was his failure to give the Chinese leadership face. He did not inform them of his election proposals before his first Legco address last year, and they have responded as expected when humiliated, especially by a colonial devil. (McGee 1993a)

A third commentator analyzed Patten’s actions as follows.

He started off by ignoring China. Then he defied China. China suffered a tremendous loss of face with the Hong Kong and Chinese people and began to retaliate psychologically, even instinctively. From then on, it was a rough ride for Hong Kong. (Chang 1994)

When, on the other hand, the British—against Patten’s better judgement—did finally agree to start negotiations with the Chinese over his reform proposals, this was described by one journalist as having ‘largely restored Beijing’s standing and injured sense of face’ (McGee 1993a).

Journalists were not the only ones to criticize Patten’s position in terms of face. Former Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kwan Yew insisted that ‘face matters because face affects [the Chinese leadership’s] standing with their own people’ (Lee 1993). An unnamed ‘colleague’ of the former Singapore leader was reported as saying that ‘China won’t reach an agreement because it can’t. National pride or face is at stake. They can’t concede to Britain, or to Mr Patten, whom they ignore’ (McGee 1993b). Even the senior member of Patten’s Executive Council (cabinet), Baroness Lydia Dunn, advised restraint in dealing with the Chinese government. ‘Making them lose face is not the way to be successful’, she said (Ellison 1993). Finally, the Chinese government itself mentioned face. One anonymous Chinese official, for example, described Patten’s introduction of his reform proposals to the Legislative Council as ‘[the British Hong Kong governor having] spat in the face of Beijing’ (Yeung and Fan 1993).

Patten, on the other hand, declared himself to be unconcerned about issues of face: ‘I don’t care about face. How can a Western politician of my background be obsessed about face?’ he said in one interview (Patten 1993: 11), explaining in another that he was less sensitive to face than Chinese officials because before coming to Hong Kong he had been democratically elected and was used to criticism and being heckled (Binks 1993). When interviewed by the present writer for this research Patten was asked if he took advice on cultural issues. His answer was as follows: ‘I could get advice on these issues. How useful it would be and how much that would certainly affect what I say is another matter’ (Flowerdew 1997a: 41). When asked if he could think of any situations in which cultural issues had led to misunderstandings with the Chinese government,
he mentioned that he had been told that irony can sound like sarcasm and
that humor is open to misunderstanding. However, in a reinforcement of
his ethnocentric attitude, he added that ‘when you’ve been called a whore
and a serpent you start to scratch your head about what precisely the
subtleties are that you haven’t quite managed to learn about’ (Flowerdew
1997a: 41).

Face and cross-cultural communication

Although commonly used as a folk term (as indicated in the previous
section), since Goffman (1967, 1971), face—the positive impression that
human beings are presumed to want to show in any social encounter—has
been the object of considerable academic inquiry as a fundamental of
human behavior. For Goffman, in every social encounter an individual
will tend to take a line, ‘a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he
expresses his view of the situations and through this his evaluation of the
participants, especially himself’ (1967: 5). Whether or not individuals
intend to take a line, they will be perceived as having done so by the other
participants. In dealing with the response of other participants individuals
must therefore take into consideration the impression they have possibly
formed of them. The term face is defined by Goffman as ‘the positive social
value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he
has taken during a particular contact’ (1967: 5). Each person, subculture,
and society has its own repertoire of face-saving practices, but this set of
practices is drawn from a universal framework. Individuals may have, or
maintain face, when they maintain their line, but they may also be in wrong
face, when information comes out which is incompatible with their line.
They may be out of face, when they do not have a line that they might be
expected to have in a certain encounter and they may save face when they
seek to preserve the impression that they have not lost face. Finally,
individuals may give face, when they arrange for others to take a better line
than might have been available to them.

For Goffman, the operation of face-work, or mutual face enhancement,
is dependent on the willingness of interactants to engage in it. In some
situations one or more interactants may decide not to participate,
preferring instead to hurt the feelings of others, forcing them to feel guilt
and remorse and creating a situation of sustained ritual disequilibrium,
a period of interaction in which face-work breaks down. In this state
the purpose in interaction is to preserve one’s own line while scoring
points against one’s adversary. Winners are those who introduce the
most information which is favorable to themselves and unfavorable to
others, thereby demonstrating that they are more capable than their
adversaries. In such interchanges, Goffman notes, an audience is normally required.

Following Goffman, for Brown and Levinson face is 'the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself' (1987: 61). Face consists of two desires which interactants attribute to one another in communication: the desire to be unimpeded (negative face) and the desire to be approved of (positive face) (1987: 62). An important feature of Brown and Levinson’s model is that, in addition to acting according to their face wants, interactants are also assumed to be guided by rationality, i.e., they will assume means which satisfy their ends. Face wants and the application of rationality together result in particular types of linguistic behavior, which Brown and Levinson refer to as negative and positive politeness: negative politeness to show independence; and positive politeness to show solidarity. In Brown and Levinson’s model positive and negative politeness only come into play in the performance of speech acts which are intrinsically face threatening (FTAs). In performing a face-threatening act speakers have a number of options, as shown in Figure 1.

The speaker may perform the FTA off record (i.e., indirectly) or on record (directly). If the latter, then this may be with or without redressive action. It is important to note that in Brown and Levinson’s model it is only where redressive action is concerned that positive and negative politeness come into play. Brown and Levinson provide an extremely detailed taxonomy of strategies which speakers use when expressing negative and positive politeness. Choice of strategy is determined by the estimated risk of loss of face in the performance of a given speech act, and by the relative power and social distance of interlocutors.

Face is a universal phenomenon, according to Goffman and Brown and Levinson. One indication of this being the case is the existence of a folk terminology for the notion in many different languages and cultures. Indeed, with respect to Chinese, Goffman’s original adoption of the term was influenced by his reading of the Chinese scholar, Hu (1944), on the

![Figure 1. Options available when performing a face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson 1987: 69)]
Chinese notion of face (Goffman 1967: 5–6, note 1). In spite of its universality, however, face is nevertheless subject to cultural variation in its application. What constitutes a desirable face may vary across cultures. For this reason face is central to an understanding of cross-cultural communication (Scollon and Scollon 1983, Brown and Levinson 1987). In addition to such broad variation, face may also vary between what might be called subcultures, such as gender, generations, organisations, regions, and class (Cupach and Imahori 1993). Furthermore, face may vary between individuals within any given subculture—a cognitive variable—according to the degree to which they may seek autonomy or acceptance, on the one hand, and be able or willing to address the face concerns of interlocutors, on the other (Cupach and Imahori 1993). Acknowledging the potential for such variation, it is to be noted that in their reissue of their original theory, Brown and Levinson (1987) accept a greater role for cultural variation within the broad framework of their theory, writing as follows:

Such cultural differences doubtless exist and work down into the linguistic details of the particular face-redressive strategies preferred in a given society or group. Nevertheless, for the purposes of cross-cultural comparison developed here, we consider that our framework provides a primary descriptive format within which, or in contrast to which, such differences can be described. (1987: 15)

Taking the relativistic position further, while acknowledging face as a universal, some researchers have questioned the whole basis of ‘universal’ models such as that of Brown and Levinson (1987) in particular (Matsumoto 1988, Du-Babcock and Babcock 1997). Brown and Levinson’s model of face and politeness takes as its starting point the rational, free individual. Face wants are determined from the perspective of the rational actions of an individual interacting with others. This may be appropriate for individualistic Western societies, these researchers have argued, but in oriental societies, which tend to be collectivistic (Hu 1944, Ho 1976, 1996, Hofstede 1980, 1991, Ting-Toomey 1985, 1989), an individual’s face wants are determined by the group as much as, if not more than, the individual. It is the reputation and face wants of the social network or in-group as a whole which motivates the individual, not just the reputation and face wants of the person directly concerned. At the same time, an individual’s face can be affected not just by the actions of that individual, but also by members of that individual’s in-group.

The collectivistic nature of oriental societies is rooted in the Confucian notion of filial piety and the so-called cardinal relations of ruler–subject, father–son, husband–wife, elder–younger, and friend–friend (King 1994, Scollon and Scollon 1994, Wu 1996). An individual’s identity is
determined in terms of these relationships (or their fictive equivalents, e.g., teacher–student), each of which requires the subordinate partner in the relationship to submit to the authority of the senior. Absolute authority of parents over their children and, by extension, of governments over their subjects requires that individuals strive to bring honor to their in-group and at the same time avoid disgrace (Ho 1996). Failure to live up to one’s filial duty results in the worst type of shame and loss of face.

In line with other researchers previously cited who emphasize the cultural dimension of face, Bond and Hwang (1986) claim that the collectivist and hierarchical structure of Chinese society has an important determining effect on communicative behavior. This contrasts with American society, for Bond and Hwang, where patterns of communication are typically determined by the values of individualism and egalitarianism. In American culture, according to Bond and Hwang, interactants have a freer choice in the use of language and action according to their individual wishes. In Chinese culture, on the other hand, the hierarchical structure of a situation is a more important determinant in what is said or done. In other words, Americans (and by extension, for the purposes of this article, British people) are less inhibited by face concerns in performing their actions than are Chinese, for whom face is likely to be a consideration of the foremost importance. As Gao, Ting-Toomey and Gudykunst (1996: 289) put it, ‘the notion of face permeates every aspect of interpersonal relationships in Chinese culture because of the culture’s overarching relational orientation’.¹⁰

Bond and Hwang (1986) describe how face typically operates in Chinese culture according to six categories: enhancing one’s own face; enhancing other’s face; losing one’s own face; hurting other’s face; saving one’s own face; and saving other’s face. This model will be illustrated in greater detail in the analysis which follows in the next section.

**Patten’s behavior from a Chinese perspective of face**

The folk accounts of the failure of Hong Kong Governor Patten and China to communicate effectively cited earlier in this article clearly interpret the breakdown in terms of face. From the Chinese point of view, Patten refused to respect the face of the Chinese government and people, while, as far as Patten was concerned, face was not a real issue. From the perspective of Goffman the war of words between the two parties can be clearly interpreted as a case of sustained ritual disequilibrium, with both sides sticking to their line and attempting to score points off each other and the Hong Kong public and international press acting as the obligatory audience. Using the terminology of Brown and Levinson, Patten refused
to address the positive face wants of the Chinese by failing to make use of positive politeness strategies. These analyses do not take us very far, however. In particular, they do not take into account the contrasting cultural nature of face which is considered to be such a factor in the folk accounts. In pursuit of an explanation in more culturally relativistic terms, using Bond and Hwang's (1986) model, this section of the article investigates the possibility of interpreting the breakdown in Patten's relations with China in terms of primarily a Chinese model of face.

*Bond and Hwang's six categories of Chinese face applied to Governor Patten*

Although the six categories of Chinese face of Bond and Hwang (1986) referred to earlier apply to individuals and their relations with their in-group members, they may also be extended to relations between nations and their governments. The metalanguage used by the Chinese government in discussing international relations is indicative of this perspective. Officials of the People's Republic frequently refer to China as the 'Motherland', especially in the context of Hong Kong, which has recently 'returned to the Motherland'. Similarly, officials refer to the 'feelings of the Chinese people' being affected when relations with other countries are concerned and the need for Hong Kong people to 'love the Motherland'. International relations, in terms of face, may thus be viewed as a fictive extension of in-group or family relations. The six categories of Bond and Hwang thus provide a framework within which to analyze Governor Patten's conduct from a Chinese perspective.

In what follows, each of Bond and Hwang's face categories will be briefly described and then applied to the conduct of Governor Patten. In this way a possible interpretation of Patten's behavior is provided from a perspective of Chinese face.

*Category 1: Enhancing one's own face*

This type of face is concerned with managing the impression one gives to others. It depends on finding out what others value and demonstrating to them that one possesses these attributes. This should be done subtly, the aim being to present a superior impression of oneself while preserving modesty.

Applying this category to the behavior of the British Hong Kong governor, Patten clearly made no effort to enhance his face in the eyes of the Chinese government. As such he was perceived as lacking in dignity. Previous Foreign Office dealings with the Chinese had been characterized
by efforts to create social harmony and personal familiarity before negotiations took place. In stark contrast to this approach, as noted earlier, invitations to Beijing at the beginning of Patten's governorship were rejected. In presenting his constitutional proposals as a fait accompli and refusing to consult with China on them beforehand, the Hong Kong governor again shocked the Chinese side, who had become accustomed to the careful diplomacy of Cradock's people and in particular, Governor Wilson, Patten's immediate predecessor.

Patten did not demonstrate due modesty either, as enhancement of one's own face would require. He claimed that he spoke with the full authority of John Major, the British prime minister, his personal friend. From the Chinese point of view, as a mere governor, with a relatively low position in the political hierarchy, this was unacceptable, especially as the territory and people Patten claimed to speak for were considered by China to fall under their sovereignty. In this respect, Patten's high-profile personal meetings with important world leaders, including those of the United States, Germany, and Japan, would have been received by the Chinese as a further indication of the Hong Kong governor behaving above his station.

Category 2: Enhancing other's face

In addition to enhancing their own face, individuals should apply tactics of ingratiation, such as flattery and agreement, to enhance the face of others who are in a superior position. This permits superiors to reciprocate in ways beneficial to the ingratiators, who thereby enhance their own face. This is the dimension of face from a Chinese cultural perspective which is probably most striking in comparison with the Anglo-Saxon model. In Chinese culture emphasis may be put on the performance of specific speech acts the primary purpose of which is giving face to others; hence the common use of the expression to give face in the Chinese language. It is significant that Goffman (1967: 9) had to borrow the term give face from Chinese in order to incorporate it into his model, suggesting perhaps that this concept was not so salient in Anglo-Saxon culture, which has the expressions to lose face and to save face, but not to give face. The notion of giving face is similarly downplayed in Brown and Levinson's model. As already shown in Figure 1, in Brown and Levinson's model face is only of concern when a face-threatening speech act is performed and politeness strategies only occur in those face-threatening acts where redressive action is called for. While Brown and Levinson do acknowledge that positive politeness may be used in its own right (to compliment or flatter, etc.), as what they call a 'social accelerator', or way for speakers to draw closer to
hearsers (1987: 103), this is not actually a part of their model. In presenting their model of face and politeness in terms of the redressing of speech acts which would otherwise be face threatening, face work is viewed as subsidiary to the main force of any message; there is no place for speech acts the primary force of which is to give face to others.

Turning to Governor Patten again, as far as enhancing other’s face is concerned, the Hong Kong Governor refused to take part in mutual face enhancement when offered the opportunity by China. In his single meeting with the Chinese official responsible for Hong Kong affairs, Lu Ping, Lu offered the olive branch (to use a Western metaphor) of mutual face enhancement when he said that he had dealt with many Hong Kong governors, that they had all become ‘old friends of China’, and that he hoped Patten would also be an ‘old friend of China’ when he left Hong Kong. Patten rejected this invitation, however, saying that he would rather be judged according to how well he had helped to implement the Joint Declaration to ensure the stability, the prosperity, and the way of life of Hong Kong (Crothall 1992).

Patten refused to enhance the face of China in many other ways. He continually affirmed what he claimed to be the British legacy to Hong Kong—the rule of law, a free market economy, individual freedom, and democratic values—features which were not part of the Chinese political system. He said that he wanted cooperation with China, but only on his terms. He used his acerbic wit to denigrate Chinese officials. And, along with anti-China activist and legislative councillor, Emily Lau, he was one of the few people in Hong Kong to insist on referring to the capital of China as Peking, in preference to Beijing, the official romanized form preferred by the Chinese government.

This failure of Patten to enhance the face of China contrasts strikingly with his predecessors as governor and other Foreign Office officials who were very happy to flatter their counterparts, a good example of which are the ritual preliminaries to meetings during which opportunities were taken by both sides to praise the other.

**Category 3: Losing one's own face**

Face is lost by not following social custom and moral behavior. If individuals are prepared to forfeit moral standards in pursuit of personal gain, then they are judged by others as 'not wanting face'. Because of the Chinese group orientation to social behavior, loss of face affects not just individuals, but also their in-group, their family, or, in the case of politics, their government or country.
On a personal level, Patten was perceived by the Chinese as being motivated by personal ambition (he was thought to have ambitions of becoming British prime minister), of being willing to sacrifice Sino-British agreement for his own benefit. This perception by the Chinese of forfeiture of moral principles by Patten explains their use of epithets such as ‘tango dancer’ (i.e., arrogant), ‘sinner of a thousand years’ and ‘prostitute’ (lacking in moral principles) and ‘snake’ (devious), to describe the Hong Kong governor. On another occasion Patten was described by a Chinese official as masquerading as a ‘savior’, i.e., attempting to redeem 150 years of British misrule by introducing democratic reform.

Category 4: Hurting other’s face

The hierarchical nature of Chinese society requires individuals to be sensitive to their position on the social ladder and to the status of those who are above and below them. Before making a request one should consider carefully the position on the social hierarchy of the requestee and the likelihood of the request being acceptable. If a request is not sensitive to the social hierarchy and what is possible, it may damage the requestee’s face, in which case retaliation may follow, in line with the principle of bao (reciprocity). Here the question of Patten’s status as a mere governor is again at issue. As far as China was concerned, agreement over the constitutional arrangements which were to straddle the handover had been arrived at between the British and Chinese governments at foreign minister level. Patten, a mere governor, did not have the right to unilaterally break this agreement. The Hong Kong governor also showed insensitivity to the diplomatic hierarchy and thereby hurt China’s face in enlisting, the high-profile support of world leaders such as Bill Clinton, Helmut Kohl, and Brian Mulroney, among others, whom, as already mentioned, he met with personally.

Category 5: Saving one’s own face

Loss of face results in shame and guilt, requiring face-saving measures. When responsibility for loss of face is attributed to the other, face may be saved by retaliation, especially if the other is not a member of the in-group. This is the behavior applied by China in reacting to Governor Patten. Given that Patten had hurt the face of the Chinese government in this way, the Chinese exercised their prerogative of retaliation—in their vilification campaign, in threats to take over Hong Kong before 1997, in threats against Sino-British trade, and in their decision to rescind Patten’s reforms and set up a provisional legislature to replace the one created by the Hong Kong governor in 1995 (Dimbleby 1997b, Flowerdew 1998).
Where direct action is not an acceptable face-saving strategy, an alternative strategy is either to ignore completely the face-losing event or issue in order to de-emphasize its seriousness. After its initial retaliatory action of vilifying Patten and emphasizing that his action would ruin the plans made by China and Britain for the change of sovereignty, China switched to this alternative self-defensive strategy, first ostracizing Patten completely and then downplaying the seriousness of Patten’s actions, while setting up its own provisional legislature to resolve the issue.

Category 6: Saving other’s face

In a hierarchical society one must pay attention to maintaining the face of others—especially one’s superiors—as well as one’s own. This is necessary because of the reciprocal nature of the face negotiation process. A threat to another’s face now is likely to result in retaliation from the other later. This explains the emphasis on harmony in Chinese interpersonal relations, the reluctance of Chinese to criticize each other, and the use of indirect or vague language if criticism is really necessary.

In his emphasis on speaking out against China, Patten clearly violated this convention of avoidance of direct criticism. Prior to his arrival on the scene, British Foreign Office sinologists had always tried to put a positive spin on Sino-British relations with China, even when China did things which, from the British point of view, appeared to be against Hong Kong’s interests (Flowerdew 1998). This is where the term pre-emptive cringe comes in, another term, Percy Kowtow, also being used by one newspaper to refer to Sir Percy Cradock (Anonymous 1995). Patten on the other hand went out of his way to criticize China, insisting that a double standard had been applied in Sino-British communication previously—China could criticize Britain, but Britain was not allowed to criticize China (Flowerdew 1997a).

Evaluation of Governor Patten as a cross-cultural communicator

The preceding analysis has systematically accounted for the reactions of the Chinese government to the actions (verbal and nonverbal) of the British Hong Kong governor, Chris Patten, from the perspective of a Chinese conception of face. According to this analysis, Patten took various actions (verbal and nonverbal) which led to a breakdown in Sino-British Hong Kong relations. Patten’s failure to comply with Chinese notions of face does not necessarily mean that he was totally misguided as a cross-cultural communicator, however. It needs to be said that the analysis of Patten from the Chinese perspective assumes that it was the
British governor who should accommodate to the Chinese, but not vice versa. As Patten himself frequently stated, those who criticized him for failing to accommodate to the Chinese applied a double standard, in putting the onus on him to adapt his behavior while not expecting the same from the other side. In this respect it is important to emphasize that this article has not considered the question of face from the British, or Patten’s, perspective. When Patten, as cited earlier, said that he was not concerned with face, this was with reference to what he took to be the Chinese concept of this notion. Elsewhere, in fact, he stated that although he was not interested in face, he was concerned about British ‘honor’. Like the Chinese, Patten was also motivated by national prestige and dignity, therefore, in spite of the fact that he chose not to accept the label face.

Patten’s ego and personal political ambition, which set him apart from earlier diplomats, making him more independent and less sensitive or accommodating to the face of his interlocutors, but highly sensitive to the face of his other audiences, the Hong Kong public and the international press, would also need to be taken into account in an assessment of face on the British side. Earlier articles (Flowerdew 1996, 1997b, 1997c) have demonstrated the great skill with which Patten ingratiated himself with the Hong Kong public, skill which resulted in very high approval ratings, according to a range of opinion polls. In this respect the various models of face reviewed in this article are all deficient in so far as they do not consider the possibility of multiple audiences. A certain linguistic act may be perceived in one way by one audience and another by others. When interviewed by me, Patten identified the problem of multiple audiences as one of his greatest problems as a public communicator (Flowerdew 1997a).

Evaluated in his own terms, Patten’s approach may find some justification. It seems likely, it is true, that he misjudged the Chinese in so far as he thought that they would be willing to compromise on his constitutional proposals and that they would not be willing to go so far as to dismantle his reforms and set up their own provisional legislature once his reforms had been put in place. It is this misjudgement which critics of Patten, cited earlier, attribute to his underestimation of the importance of face for the Chinese. Within the overall context of his communicative strategy vis-à-vis the Chinese, however, these misjudgements were less important for Patten when set against his overall goal of winning the support of the Hong Kong people, giving the soon-to-be-relinquished colony a taste of democracy and securing British withdrawal with honor. His main audience was not China, therefore, but the Hong Kong people and the international media.
A final factor that needs to be taken into account in an evaluation of Patten as a cross-cultural communicator is the possible exploitation of face theory by China for its own strategic purposes. According to this interpretation, in accordance with the principle of *bao* (reciprocity), Patten's face-threatening behavior would have provided China with a pretext for retaliation, for being equally, or even more, unaccommodating. In this case it provided them with a reason to set up a constitutional system without the need to take into account the wishes of the British Hong Kong government and majority Hong Kong public opinion. Without this pretext of Patten's face-threatening behavior, China would likely have needed to compromise its own wishes with at least some accommodation towards the preferences of the British Hong Kong government, if only to satisfy international and Hong Kong public opinion. It is here that the position of the sinologists who had been in charge of British Hong Kong policy prior to the arrival on the scene of Patten is relevant. By accommodating to Chinese face, these diplomats argue, more would have been achieved, from the British perspective, in the long run. Patten, on the other hand, as previously noted, did not accept this view, arguing in one interview that

I dare say, there are some who, if China were saying 'our price is the slaughter of the first-born', would say: 'Well, maybe that's not unreasonable in the circumstances ... you have to allow for different cultural traditions, you know.' (Tacey 1997, Dimbleby 1997b)

In terms of *realpolitik* an overall evaluation of the relationship between the British and Chinese governments during the Patten era might be that while both parties protested that they wanted cooperation, independence was what suited them best; independence for Britain to go its own way in administering Hong Kong, to criticize China, and to thereby secure an honorable withdrawal; and independence for China to set up its own arrangements for the constitutional system in post-1997 Hong Kong, to criticize Britain and its representative, Patten, and to gain face in the eyes of its people and the world at large in making up for a century-and-a-half of colonial subjugation and national shame.

**Conclusion**

As noted in the introduction, investigation of specific problems in cross-cultural discourse/communication can contribute to an understanding of real-world problems, on the one hand, and provide insights for on-going theory building in discourse analysis, on the other. As far as contributing
to an understanding of real-world problems is concerned, this article has demonstrated how face may have been an important variable in relations between Britain and China over Hong Kong during the period leading up to the change of sovereignty in 1997. The article has shown how China's actions (both verbal and otherwise) may have been motivated by face concerns (bearing in mind, at the same time, the possibility of a strategic use of face by China to achieve its political ends), while the British Hong Kong governor, Chris Patten, demonstrated great insensitivity to China's sense of face. In terms of discourse/communication theory the article has stressed the importance of cultural relativity in face theory. Specifically, as regards Chinese culture, it has been argued, an application of a model such as that of Brown and Levinson is enhanced if the collectivistic nature of the Chinese perspective—in particular the greater role assigned to positive face enhancement, or, in Goffman's terms (borrowed from the Chinese) giving face—is taken into account. At the same time, the article has tested Bond and Hwang's cultural model of Chinese face in the context of international relations involving China and Britain and demonstrated it to possess a considerable degree of explanatory power.

Notes

1. Research for this paper was funded by City University of Hong Kong Strategic Grants #7000336 and #7000593. I am grateful to Ron Scollon for his comments on an earlier version.

2. The data for the empirical part of this study were collected over the five years of Patten's governorship. They are divided into two corpora: a collection of Patten's key speeches, interviews, public meetings, press conferences, and other public pronouncements; and a collection of several thousand press articles and television programs dealing with Hong Kong's political transition and Patten's governorship. These corpora are further supported by interviews with Patten and his advisors.

3. Wilson had studied Chinese at the beginning of his diplomatic career and later temporarily resigned from the Foreign Service to write a Ph.D. thesis on China and edit the prestigious academic journal, China Quarterly.

4. When interviewed for this research, Patten identified 'standing up for Hong Kong against China' as one of the main communicative strategies of his governorship (Flowerdew 1997a: 37).

5. This list of epithets was recited to the author in an interview with Patten's information coordinator, Kerry McGlynn, on 25 January 1996.

6. In interviews prior to his departure from Hong Kong, Patten repeatedly said that his one regret was that he had not withdrawn from negotiations with China earlier, realizing all along that they would not lead anywhere.

7. Tannen (1986) prefers the more neutral terms 'independence' and 'involvement', to avoid the evaluative connotations of 'negative' and 'positive' politeness.

8. See my earlier papers (Flowerdew 1996, 1997b) for applications of Brown and Levinson's taxonomy of politeness strategies in Patten's interaction with the people of Hong Kong.
For this reason, for discourse analysts such as Tannen (1985: 203), the term cross-cultural is broadened to include such differences.

To forestall accusations that the above account of Chinese face is nothing but essentialist stereotyping, it is worth pointing out that this work is grounded in considerable ethnographic and psychological empirical work (see, e.g., the papers collected in Bond 1996).

Family metaphors are also used locally in Hong Kong: Britain is often depicted as a surrogate mother who has been looking after a child, Hong Kong, while the real mother, China, due to the vicissitudes of recent history has been unable to care for her. Now that the real mother has returned to a stable state, Hong Kong may return to her. The metaphor is on occasions extended further. At a public meeting held by Governor Chris Patten and attended by the author (Government Information Service 1996), a questioner asked Britain to issue Hong Kong people with full British passports as an insurance policy in case things went wrong post 1997 under Chinese sovereignty. Using the metaphor of Britain as the 'adoptive' mother, the speaker said that an adoptive mother should be willing to take back responsibility for a child if the child was again mistreated after returning to the real mother.

Given that face is a cultural rather than a specifically linguistic notion, the phrase to give face is also commonly used by Hong Kong Chinese when speaking in English.


This accusation was not limited to the Chinese, incidentally, but was also made by those on the British side who disagreed with his policies.

Such behavior is what Goffman (1967) calls sustained ritual disequilibrium, as noted earlier.

Right up to the handover Patten was denied any direct contact with Chinese officials.

This emphasis on decorum and the saving of face initially seems contradictory to China's aggressive behavior, not only towards Patten, but also in its dealings with other governments, such as that of Taiwan. Observers are often puzzled by the emphasis placed on harmonious relations and decorum in Chinese society, on the one hand, and the aggressive nature of China in its dealings with foreign governments, on the other. Governor Patten himself, for example, stated that he attributed China's behavior towards him to owe more to communism than to traditional Chinese culture (Wallen and Manuel 1996). Observers find it hard to comprehend China's repeated threats of military intervention in Taiwan, its vilification of the Taiwanese President Li Teng-hui, its firing of missiles over Taiwanese territory, and its threat to drop a nuclear bomb on Los Angeles if the United States interfered in its aggressive behavior towards Taiwan. Similarly, they were shocked when China threatened to take over Hong Kong before 1997 if Patten failed to back down on his reform proposals. In order to understand this apparent contradiction in China's communicative behavior, a distinction can be made between relations within the in-group and with the out-group. Chinese rules of social behavior are determined primarily by a concern to maintain the harmony of the in-group. Confucius provided rules of behavior for five key relationships, but had nothing to say about dealing with out-group members (Bond and Wang 1981). In the cases such as that of President Li and the Taiwanese government and of Patten, because these individuals, in the eyes of China, failed to comply with the various precepts of face behavior as outlined above, they have excluded themselves from the social network and as such are legitimate targets for retaliation according to the principle of reciprocity.

Patten said that for him face meant 'being concerned with how you look to others', while honor was 'about what you do to or for others' (Patten 1993: 11).
References

Binks, Mary (1993). Bad deal may lead to turmoil: Patten. Hong Kong Standard, 9 October.
—(1997a). An interview with Chris Patten, Governor of Hong Kong. Perspectives: Working Papers of the Department of English, City University of Hong Kong 8 (2): 30–44.
Government Information Service (1996). Transcript of a public meeting held at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre with Chris Patten, Governor of Hong Kong, 14 October.


McGee, Christine (1993a). Will the governor let legco do the talking? *South China Morning Post*, 4 September.


John Flowerdew is Professor in the English Department at the City University of Hong Kong. His research interests include political discourse, academic discourse, and cross-cultural discourse. He has published in a range of leading discourse journals. His book, *The Final Years of British Hong Kong: The Discourse of Colonial Withdrawal* (Macmillan), focuses on Hong Kong's change of sovereignty from Britain to China.