



Helena M. Lischka, Peter Kürble (Eds.)

# **Intercultural Competencies in China**

**Kohlhammer**

### 3.1 Introduction

In the Shanghai office of a U.S. multinational corporation, the Head of Sales meets with his local team to discuss last month's target shortfall. Regional Sales Manager Yuan Li is questioned repeatedly about his team's continuing underperformance. The Head of Sales openly states his disappointment. He repeats his expectation that Yuan Li is accountable for the results of his team and that he should have taken measures. Li nods silently. He leaves the meeting, avoids a further discussion – and never returns.<sup>143</sup>

Yi has lost self-respect, he has lost *face*. Face refers to a claimed sense of favourable social self-worth that a person wants others to have of her or him in a relational and network context. Whereas face is a universal phenomenon, how people shape its meaning differs across cultures.<sup>144</sup> In China, face is a critical element of the social structure. It signifies the importance of how one is regarded by others within society both privately and publicly and undoubtedly influences any kind of human interaction, especially business communication.

After a short explanation of the meaning of *face*, this chapter will explore the historical, societal and cultural roots that lead to the importance of face. It then draws a theoretical framework in order to better understand this phenomenon in general terms. Practical examples will illustrate how face can be handled and applied in Chinese business context. The chapter concludes with a résumé.

### 3.2 What is the Meaning of *Face*?

In contrast to a *culture of guilt*, which is typical to most European countries, the Chinese society is characterised by a *culture of shame*. Both concepts – guilt and shame – are methods of social control. In a guilt society, control is maintained by creating and continually reinforcing the feeling of guilt for certain behaviours. In a shame society, the primary means of control is the exposure to shame and the associated risk of exclusion. Consequently, maintaining someone's face is probably the most crucial factor of social

---

143 Cf. Vorhauser-Smith, S. (2012), 17.04.2017.

144 Cf. Li, J. J., & Su, C. (2007), p. 239.