

“Face Rules,” Reciprocity, and Brotherhood in the Chinese Networking Culture: A Rereading of Two Stories of the Hero Wu Song

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Abstract

This study re-examines the two stories, “Killing a Tiger with His Bare Hands” and “Beating Jiang the Gate Guard Giant” of the major hero Wu Song of the Water Margin, the best loved vernacular novel appearing in fourteenth-century China. I argue that in the former story, Wu Song does not intend to confront the tiger but has to make a choice between risking his life or losing face; in the latter, I explain that Wu fights the hooligan Jiang primarily to repay Shi En’s kindness, and secondarily to assist this newly made sworn brother. These stories reflect important social traditions and ethical values in traditional Chinese social interaction, from which today’s networking culture develops. I conclude that “face rules,” the principle of reciprocity, and the brotherhood-type relationship illustrated in these two stories are fundamental to Chinese networking culture and help understand Chinese networks and networking practices and facilitate network building in today’s China.

Key words: Chinese networking culture, face rules, reciprocity, brotherhood, Wu Song, *Water Margin*,

“Face Rules,” Reciprocity, and Brotherhood in the Chinese Networking Culture: A Rereading of Two Stories of the Hero Wu Song

Wu Song is a major hero in *Water Margin* 水滸傳 (Shuihuzhuan), the best loved novel in the vernacular appearing in fourteenth-century China. His heroic and righteous characteristics have fascinated Chinese people for over 600 years.¹ Along with his popularity, cultural traditions and values embodied in his

¹Here I count only from the time *Water Margin* appears. Actually, Wu Song, as one of the thirty-six bandit-heroes of the group led by Song Jiang, first appears in *Incidents during the Xuanhe Period of the Great Song Dynasty* 大宋宣和遺事 (Da Song Xuanheyishi), a compilation of notebook fiction 筆記小說 (*Bijixiaoshuo*) by an anonymous writer in the Southern Song (1127-

characterization have become deeply ingrained in the mindset of Chinese people, elite and populace alike. This paper is a rereading of two stories of Wu Song in the context of interpersonal relationships and social interaction in traditional China.

Water Margin, attributed to Shi Nai'an 施耐庵 (ca. 1296-1372) and LuoGuanzhong 羅貫中 (ca. 1330-ca.1400), is the first full-length vernacular novel in literary history and is acclaimed as one of the "Four Marvelous Masterpieces" of Ming fiction.² The *Water Margin* story is similar to medieval England's legend of Robin Hood, whose career as an outlaw is also precipitated by unrest and injustice. Both are set in times of political chaos and corruption. Robin Hood originates in the thirteenth century, where King-presumptive John, ruling in place of his brother Richard away on the Third Crusade, becomes the principal villain. The *Water Margin* is set in the latter part of the Song dynasty (960-1127), when many suffered misadventures and injustices and became bandit-heroes. Contrasting markedly to the lone hero of Robin Hood who leads a band of "Merry Men" to rise up against King John's misrule, the *Water Margin* narrates the biographical stories of 108 bandit-heroes, three of them women, who led thousands of followers to rebel against Prime Minister Cai Jing's tyrannical government.

Chapters 23 through 32 in the novel, commonly called "The Ten Wu Song Chapters" 武十回 (*Wu shihui*), are devoted to Wu Song, describing his background and heroic stories. Among these stories, "Wu Song Kills a Tiger on Jingyang Ridge" and "Wu Song, Drunk, Beats Jiang the Gate Guard Giant," contribute the most to characterizing this hero and exemplify "face rules," the principle of reciprocity, and brotherhood in interpersonal relationships and social interaction in traditional China, from which today's Chinese networking culture developed.

Losing Face or Risking Life?

Wu Song's feat of killing a man-eating tiger with his bare hands on Jingyang Ridge is a much admired heroic deed. A rereading of this story, however, shows that it was not because he intended to fight the tiger that Wu Song insisted on crossing the ridge where he met it, but because he did not want to be laughed at. In other words, he preferred to risk his life rather than lose face.

When he first appeared in the novel, Wu Song was on the run due to an alleged crime: over a year earlier, when he was drunk, he knocked a man senseless to the ground and, thinking that he had killed him, ran away. Later Wu learned that the man hadn't died, so he planned to go home and see his elder brother. On the way home, he drank at a tavern near Jingyang Ridge in a neighboring county to his hometown and got completely intoxicated. The host of the tavern told him that recently a tiger had already killed nearly thirty strong men and that the county government had proclaimed that travelers must go in groups and cross the ridge only during a certain time of day. Wu did not believe him and insisted on going on his way. On the ridge he saw the official notice, but he decided to try his luck anyway. When Wu encountered the tiger and found no way to hide, in his haste he struck an old tree instead of the tiger, snapping his only weapon, a

1279), which had been circulating widely since that time and was later adapted into *Water Margin*. Also, after the *Water Margin* was composed, the Wu Song story has been remade many times in various Chinese media.

² According to Li Yu 李漁 (1611-1680), the late Ming critic FengMenglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1646) dubbed *Water Margin, Romance of the Three Kingdoms, The Plum in the Golden Vase*, and *Journey to the West* the "Four Marvelous Masterpieces of the Ming dynasty." See Li Yu, *Li Yu quanji* 李漁全集 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang gujichubanshe, 1992, Vol. 5), 1.

wooden staff, in two. But with a great deal of luck, and using his excellent martial arts skills, Wu won the battle and killed the tiger.

This story establishes Wu Song's heroism. In traditional Chinese culture, the tiger is a symbol of prowess and ferocity. There are numerous proverbs and popular sayings that use the tiger to symbolize fierceness and danger, such as "to negotiate with a tiger for its skin" 與虎謀皮(*yuhumou pi*) suggesting the naïveté of asking an evil person to act against their own interests, and "keeping the company of an emperor is like keeping the company of a tiger" 伴君如伴虎(*ban junru ban hu*), which alludes to the hazards of serving an emperor. On the other hand, there are also proverbs and popular sayings involving tigers that are used to praise bravery, including "deliberately going into the mountains knowing there are tigers there" 明知山有虎, 偏向虎山行(*mingzhishan you hu, pianxianghushanxing*) (to be undeterred facing danger), and "without entering the tiger's lair, how can one catch its cub?" 不入虎穴, 焉得虎子? (*buruhuxue, yandehuzi*) meaning "nothing ventured, nothing gained."

However, Wu Song had not expected to fight the tiger. After he left the tavern and came closer to the ridge where he saw a warning notice, he grinned to himself, thinking, "That host is a crafty one. Scares his customers into staying the night. Well, he can't scare me!"³ So Wu continued walking until he saw the official warning. He now realized there really was a tiger and considered returning to the tavern, but halted and said to himself:

If I do that, the host will laugh at me for a coward. I can't go back. (207)

For fear of being laughed at he decided to continue crossing the ridge (there cannot be other reasons for that decision since he had been struck sober at seeing the official notice and he would not have believed that he could kill a tiger by his skills in martial arts). In this dilemma — losing face or risking his life — Wu chose the latter.

For the Chinese, "face" is not only a word referring to a part of the human body, it is also a figurative expression that means having personal dignity in the context of social interaction. It is an essential component of the Chinese psyche. In his *Chinese Characteristics*, a book that was widely read in the late nineteenth and early twenty centuries, Arthur H. Smith (1845-1932) devotes the first chapter to "face," in which he points out, "once rightly apprehended, 'face' will be found to be in itself a key to the combination lock of many of the most important characteristics of the Chinese."⁴ Smith's statement applies to the Chinese soul from ancient times to the present.

The figurative use of "face" as a term for personal dignity is found in early sources. In the Spring and Autumn period (720-480 BCE), Duke Huan of Qi 齊桓公 (716-643 BCE), having lost his kingdom and exiled, regretted that he had not taken the advice of his late Prime Minister Guan Zhong 管仲 (725- 645 BCE). He said, "it is fine if the deceased cannot perceive things; if they can, what 'face' will I have when meeting Guan Zhong underground [in the future]?" 死者無知則已, 若有知, 吾何面目以見仲父于地下.⁵ Also, when Xiang Yu 項羽 (232-202 BCE) was defeated after a long struggle for power, he refused to leave

³J.H. Jackson, trans., *The Water Margin: Outlaws of the Marsh* (North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing), 207. Hereafter, only page numbers are given in the text for quotations from this book.

⁴Arthur H. Smith, *Chinese Characteristics* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1894), 17.

⁵Zhao Shouzheng 趙守正, annot., *Guanzitongjie* 管子通解 (Beijing: Beijing jingjixueyuanchubanshe, 1989), 437.

in a boat prepared for his escape on the grounds that he had led “eight thousand sons and younger brothers east of Wu River” to battle, but no one came back except himself. He said, “even if the fathers and older brothers east of Wu River are kind to me and still respect me as a king, how can I have ‘face’ to meet them?” 縱江東父兄憐而王我，我何面目見之？⁶ After saying this, he killed himself with his sword.

The concept of face is still of vital importance in modern China: “as human beings live for face, trees grow for bark” 人活一張臉，樹活一張皮 goes a popular saying. Also, in a recent survey conducted by *China Youth Daily*, over 93 percent of the 1,150 polled said they pay much attention to face. When asked what was most humiliating for them, a large number accounting for 74.9 percent of the total chose public gaffes, and more than a half of the respondents felt ashamed of being exposed as ignorant before others.⁷

Thus, as both Duke Huan of Qi and Xiang Yu felt a loss of dignity and sense of shame in losing face, moderns feel humiliation or shame due to self-perceived public gaffes or looking ignorant. Two important aspects of face arise from these, which we may call “face rules.” First, the concept of face functions through a sense of shame. In the Classics, Guan Zhong first promoted a sense of shame among ordinary people based on economic development, proclaiming, “when they have enough food and clothing [to not worry about basic needs], people have feelings of glory or shame.” 衣食足而知榮辱.⁸ Also, Confucius (551-479 BCE), opposing the penalties and laws put forth by the legalists, maintained that the evocation of a sense of shame in people is essential to a good government:

If the people are kept in System by administration and all treated as equals in the matter of punishment, they may succeed in doing no wrong, but they will also feel no sense of shame. On the other hand, if they are kept in System by Excellence and are treated as equals before the rites, they will reform themselves through a sense of shame” 道之以政，齊之以刑，民免而無恥，道之以德，齊之以禮，有恥且格. (*Analects*, 2:3)⁹

The sense of shame, which has been long established in the minds of Chinese people and central to Chinese culture, formed the basis for “face rules.” Second, “face” is a concept only meaningful in the context of social interaction. Duke Huan of Qi would have felt embarrassed if the deceased Guan Zhong could still perceive things and Xiang Yu felt too ashamed to return to his native people. No “face” concern would exist for them without the thought of meeting others. In the modern context, if gaffes or ignorance are not shown in public or before others, survey respondents reported not feeling humiliated or ashamed. Therefore, “face rules” are rules of social interaction. If losing face did not translate into a sense of shame and that sense had not been embedded in his personification as a hero, Wu Song might not have wanted to risk his life. Likewise, if he was not going to meet the host of the tavern again when he returned, Wu Song would most likely have gone back, since he did consider returning to the tavern upon seeing the official notice.

⁶ Han Zhaoqi 韓兆琦, annot., *Shiji* (Beijing: Zhonghuashuju, 2007), 86.

⁷ Echo Shan, “‘Mianzi’ of Chinese Weighs a Lot, Comes at a Price,” *China Daily*, August 8, 2005, accessed March 22, 2014, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-08/08/content_467216.htm.

⁸ Zhao, *Guanzitongjie*, 2.

⁹ The translation is taken from James R. Ware, trans., *The Sayings of Confucius* (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, inc., 1955), 25.

Reciprocity and Brotherhood

Wu Song beating Jiang the Gate Guard Giant is another heroic deed highly respected among Chinese people due to its representation of “righteousness”義 (yì), helping the weak and fighting the bully. A rereading of the story however reveals that Wu Song took this action mainly to repay Shi En’s kindness and help this newly made sworn brother, reflecting the principle of reciprocity and brotherhood-type relationship in Chinese social networks.

After he killed the tiger, Wu Song was made a constable of the county where he found his elder brother. He soon left the town for several weeks on a mission, during which his elder brother was poisoned by his wife and her lover. Having failed to exact justice from the authorities, he decided to take the matter into his own hands and slayed the adulterous couple. Since the locals all sympathized with Wu, the court ended up sentencing him to face-tattooing and exiling him to a prison in Mengzhou. There Wu Song met the prison warden’s son, Shi En, a future bandit-hero. Shi En had run a profitable tavern, but was forcibly taken away by Jiang the Gate Guard Giant who came to the area with his master, the stockade garrison commandant. Since Jiang was strong and skilled in fighting and wrestling, and moreover had the backing of Commandant Zhang’s garrison, Shi En had no way to get revenge.

Having heard about the hero Wu Song before, when Wu was delivered to the prison Shi En saved him from the “Spirit-Breaking Beating” that new prisoners received upon arrival and subsequently secured for him an easy life in the prison, letting him stay in a single room and have good meals and wine every day. Since no one told him why he was so well treated in the prison, Wu became more and more curious and eventually demanded an explanation before taking more food and wine. Then Shi came to tell his story, expressing his hope that Wu take revenge for him. Wu was so eager to repay Shi for his kindnesses that he immediately promised to fight Jiang. Hearing that Wu would help his son, Shi En’s father made them sworn friends on the spot. Then Wu defeated Jiang in a fierce fight and took back the tavern for Shi. The fighting was spectacular: utterly drunk, Wu beat Jiang with his marvelous “drunken fist.”

Wu Song was conferred a kindness by Shi En first (interestingly, Shi En’s 施恩 name itself means “conferring kindnesses”) and intended to repay it, as he explicitly expressed to Shi:

You saved me from a beating the other day, and now you sent me food and drink. It’s really not right. And you haven’t asked me to do a single thing. Such unmerited kindness disturbs my sleep and spoils my appetite. (289)

Repayment for the debit of kindness reflects the principle of reciprocity in Chinese social networks. The Chinese people take repayment seriously and regard it as a magnificent act that one repays others for their kindness when able. Among numerous proverbs and popular sayings highlighting the value of repayment, one praises those who “know [others’] kindness and have the intent to repay” 知恩圖報 (*Zhi’entubao*) and another denounces those who “forget the received kindness and violate the righteousness” 忘恩負義 (*Wang’enfuyi*). Interestingly, a prize-winning high school student essay in 2012 was titled “Knowing [others’] Kindness and Having the Intent to Repay: Learning to Be a Decent Person” 知恩圖報學做人. The essay asserted that a well-mannered individual is one who has the intention to paying a debt of gratitude.¹⁰

Another reason Wu Song fought Jiang was because of his *jiangyiqi* 講義氣 (upholding fraternal loyalty), as Shi En befriended Wu when the latter came under his authority and Wu Song might feel obliged to help his newly made friend. *Yiqi*, fraternal loyalty or “fraternal righteousness” counts a type of “righteousness,”

¹⁰“Zhientubaoxuezuoren,” accessed March 22, 2014, <http://gaokao.zhyww.cn/201207/62531.html>.

one of the Five Constants, along with “benevolence” 仁 (*ren*), “etiquette” 禮 (*li*), “intelligence” 智 (*zhi*), and “integrity” 信 (*xin*). The Five Constants are basic Confucian principles in social relations. *Analects* originated this set of principles by putting forth “benevolence,” “righteousness,” and “etiquette;” later Mencius (孟子 372-289 BCE) included “intelligence,” and still later Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179-104 BCE) added “integrity” and called them “Five Constants:” “Benevolence, righteousness, etiquette, intelligence, and integrity are way of Five Constants.” 夫仁誼(義)禮知(智)信, 五常之道.¹¹ As one of the basic Confucian principles, “righteousness” is set forth for dealing with interpersonal relationships and is embodied as fraternal loyalty among friends.

An extension of kin relationships to non-kin relations is characteristic of Chinese culture, including traditional social networks of brotherhoods where fraternal loyalty is highly valued. Ideally, Chinese society should be like a big family with members caring for each other. From a very young age, children are taught to respect elders outside their own family and address them using kinship terms, such as “uncle” or “auntie.” A child would call a boy from another family “elder / younger brother” and a girl “elder / younger sister.” A network of relationships between members of equal age is considered a brotherhood, not just a group of acquaintances or associations. Fraternal loyalty, in the expression of “righteousness,” legitimately promotes a stronger sense of mutual aid and trust and loyalty to each other. When one has difficulty, he can depend on his friends. As the popular saying goes, “be ready to plant daggers in your chest for a friend,” suggesting that a friend should do anything he can do for you, even sacrifice his life. This might be the reason why Shi En’s father made his son as sworn brother of Wu Song. Since Jiang had the backing of Commandant Zhang’s garrison, even Shi En, a local who had higher status, dared not confront him for fear of causing serious problems; Wu Song would do it for his new sworn brother at any cost. He told Shi En, “If I hit him too hard and kill him, I’m quite willing to pay for it with my life!” (291). (Later Wu Song suffered the consequences being trapped by Jiang and Zhang and nearly lost his life.)

Fraternal loyalty in the name of righteousness is one of the central themes of the *Water Margin*. Like Robin Hood and his Merry Men who referred to themselves as a “gallant fraternity,” the *Water Margin* heroes and their followers upheld “fraternal righteousness” and promoted brotherhood among themselves. But unlike the Robin Hood fraternal network, which was limited to small social groups, the *Water Margin*’s brotherhood and “fraternal righteousness,” as social tradition and ethical values, were widespread in Chinese society.

In today’s China, fraternal loyalty is still an important ethical value in interpersonal relations. When interviewed by *China Economic Weekly*, Chen Zhijian 陳知建, son of Senior General Chen Geng 陳賡 (1903-1961), proudly talked about his father and family upholding this value:

It is our Chen family tradition that we uphold both the principles and spirit of the [Chinese Communist] Party and fraternal loyalty. If somebody only cared about the spirit of the Party but did not care about fraternal loyalty, we would call him a scoundrel. 我們既講黨性原則，又講哥們兒義氣。哪個人光講黨性不講義氣，他就是個壞蛋。我們陳家就這個傳統。¹²

¹¹Yan Shigu 顏師古 annot., *Hanshu* 漢書 vol., 8 (Beijing: Zhonghuashuju, 1962), 2505.

¹² Zhou Haibin 周海濱 and Teng Da 騰達, *People’s News Net*, January 18, 2010, accessed March 22, 2014,

<http://dangshi.people.com.cn/BIG5/120281/10785604.html>.

Also, fraternal loyalty is extensively promoted in today's literature, television, and folk art forms. To name a few, an ongoing web novel series about city life is entitled *Yiqidangtou* 義氣當頭 (Fraternal Loyalty First).¹³ Another, *Yong bumomie de fanhao* 永不磨滅的番號 (Never lose your military outfit) (2011 TV series) concerns a Chinese army in the anti-Japanese war, and names its theme song *Yiqi*.¹⁴ Finally, a recent *xiangsheng* 相聲 (comic crosstalk) program is titled *Yiqiqianqiu* 義氣千秋 (Fraternal Loyalty Forever).¹⁵ Even though many criticize the abuse of fraternal loyalty in officialdom, business worlds, and among youngsters, they honor this ethical value, only disapproving when its ill-practice brings harm to people outside the circles where fraternal loyalty is used.¹⁶

Conclusion: Fundamentals of the Chinese Networking Culture

The two tales of Wu Song illustrate "face rules," reciprocity principle, and brotherhood in traditional Chinese society. Today's networking culture develops from these fundamental social traditions and values, and helps in understanding today's social networks and networking practices.

Based on these traditions, Chinese social networks are brotherhood-type relationships in which fraternal loyalty is valued implicitly or explicitly. Networking involves developing relationships with a variety of people in a chosen field. Contacts are made from coworkers, professional organizations, social relationships, and current clients, through meetings and conferences, having group meals, personal contacts, and so on. By comparison, the Western network is primarily a source of information and introduction; the role of the contacts is limited to providing information that one needs for the operation of his business and introducing him to more sources of information. One's contacts are not acting on his behalf to do things. But the Chinese network, a brotherhood-type correlation, is primarily a source of mutual aid. The role of contacts is not limited to providing information; one's contacts, like members in a brotherhood, would act on his behalf to do things as needed. Also, reciprocal benefit among members is a principle of networking and everyone in the network has reciprocal obligations. If you receive help from others and cannot repay them as needed in the future, your relationships with them will not be able to continue.

Also, "face rules" shed light on developing strategies for networking in the Chinese context. "Face rules" in social interaction work primarily in two ways: First, from the standpoint of the individual, one can "have face" 有面子 (*you mainzi*), "earn face" 掙臉 (*zhenglian*), "save face" 保面子 (*baomainzi*), or "lose face" 丟臉 (*diulian*). For example, if one has done something good in the eyes of other people he will have personal dignity and may try to do more good things in order to earn more personal dignity. If one has done something wrong, he would be unwilling to openly admit it, but may correct himself later in order to save his personal dignity. Insults or criticism are thought to cause loss of personal dignity. "Saving face" is central to one's concern in this regard. In the novel, in order to "save" his personal dignity, Wu Song did

¹³Kugua Fate 苦瓜 Fate, *Yiqidangtou*, accessed March 22, 2014, <http://www.qidian.com/Default.aspx>.

¹⁴XuJizhou 徐紀周 directed, *Yong bumomie de fanhao*, 2011.

¹⁵GuoDegang 郭德綱 and Yu Qian 于謙, *Yiqiqianqiu* 義氣千秋, 2014.

¹⁶ See Xi Qidong 謝啟東, "Guanyuanbixuyuanli 'gemenyiqi'" 官員必須遠離"哥們義氣" (Officials Must Stay Away from

"Fraternal Loyalty"), accessed March 22, 2014, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0207/c241220-24290048.html>

Ershiyishijizhongxiaoxuesheng sushi jiaoyuwenku 二十一世紀中小學生素質教育文庫, "Weilegemenyiqi" 為了哥們義氣 (For the Sake of Fraternal Loyalty), accessed March 22, 2014, http://gz.eywedu.com/21cnjy/TS013010/0026_ts013010.htm.

hid his fear and in the end not only successfully saved his personal dignity but also earned a great deal of personal dignity by killing the tiger.

Second, from the standpoint of others, they may “care about the face” 顧面子 (*gumainzi*) of the individual, “let [the individual] have face” 留面子 (*liumainzi*), “deprive [the individual] of face” 駁面子 (*bomianzi*), or “give face” 給面子 (*geimianzi*) to the individual. For example, if they care for this individual’s personal dignity or let him have personal dignity, they should avoid pointing out his mistakes openly; if they want to give face to the individual, they should show respect to him in some way. They should not refuse requests for help, or at least refuse indirectly. To do so would deprive the individual of personal dignity. The greatest virtue for other people in this regard is to “give face” to the individual. Chinese networking involves developing brotherhood-type relationships with people in a chosen field, in which “face rules” must be followed.

The proper use of the “face rules” facilitates building networks. One can establish friendships built on previous acquaintance such as being former classmates or colleagues, or coming from the same hometown. Alternatively, “face rules” can be used win new friendships, which is Wu Song and Shi En’s relationship illustrates. Shi En gave hospitality in exchange for Wu Song’s help. The food and wine meant a lot to Wu not just for sustenance, but more importantly, he felt that he was given face. In addition, when they first met, Shi En “dropped at Wu Song’s feet and kowtowed” (289). When Shi En’s father made Wu a blood brother with Shi En, he said, “Don’t refuse my son. Drain this cup and accept his four kowtows. Let him call you elder blood brother as a sign of his respect” (292). Wu felt deeply indebted, saying, “I am a prisoner, under your rule” (289). Having been given so much face, Wu Song decided to help his new friend at any price. Wu Song “won face” and, reciprocally, Shi En was rewarded with (fraternal) loyalty. It is an important strategy for making friends that one shows respect to certain people in some way, including gift giving, just as Shi En did to Wu Song. Paying respect to people is “giving face” and wins reciprocal friendship.

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