

Chinese Face Reading Goes West: From the Clinic to the Quotidian

Everyday Applications of Oriental Physiognomy

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The integrative world view associated with Oriental medicine recognizes there is no intrinsic separation between the polarities of existence – yin embraces yang – and the nature of the physical realm finds its echo in the heavens. It's likewise our understanding that in the treatment protocols of constitutional facial acupuncture renewal, the face provides us with a mirror of the inner workings of the body. In treating the whole person, we can affect beneficial change in the countenance, re-establishing a fundamental harmony manifested in greater *shen* and healthy aging.

Similarly, in the discipline of Chinese face reading, the elemental makeup of the individual can be ascertained from an examination of the facial terrain. An analysis of this nature may be used to great benefit in the treatment of constitutional imbalances. That landscape is considered to be indicative of the essential character of the individual – a product of their genetic heritage, and, at the same time, providing both a transcript of their life experience and a harbinger of their future destiny.

In the article that follows, my colleague, Charles Yarborough, provides us with a perspective on more practical applications of this ancient art, which is becoming prevalent here in this hemisphere, while reminding us of its origins in the holistic paradigm of Oriental medicine.

Chinese Face Reading for the Western World

One of the great things about America is its eagerness to absorb and adapt elements of other cultures, accepting them as its own. And it is testimony to the vastness and originality of Chinese culture that many of its inventions have made their way west, helping to define modern life. While not as well-known as gunpowder, pasta or the magnetic compass, Chinese face reading is an idiosyncratic, but adaptable export that generates ever-increasing interest. Employed not only by licensed acupuncturists as a method of understanding the complexities of health and character, Chinese face reading now is being used by corporate personnel directors in the hiring and training of staff. A less likely application of this ancient, but ever useful art occurred recently in a Los Angeles courtroom.

Courtroom Drama

After spending three hours sifting through potential jurors for a multimillion-dollar lawsuit, two beleaguered attorneys turned to a friend of mine, an enthusiastic amateur face reader, and asked her to introduce herself.

She stood up and did so, adding this comment: "Your Honor, if chosen for jury duty, I have already decided whom I will vote for and whom I will vote against. I won't need three weeks of testimony."

"What?" said the judge.

My friend boldly continued, "I've performed an evaluation of everybody in this courtroom, including counsel for the defense. It's obvious from the shape of his face and exaggerated jaw line that counsel plans to bully the jurors just as he bullies his hot-headed client. Bullies tend to trample the truth in order to get their way, which brings up a credibility issue. The attorney for the plaintiff isn't very likeable either, but his wedge-shaped face and small mouth tell me he values the truth and cuts to the chase. He won't try to confuse the issues by pandering to the jury. That would be cynical and usually backfires anyway."

"What on earth are you talking about?" said the judge.

"And lastly, I've evaluated the defendant who is an obviously impulsive character. Would I trust him to conduct his affairs responsibly? Goodness no! His low forehead, pointed ears and red eyes tell me he's unstable. People like him may generate excitement, but then comes the conflict and hurt feelings."

"Madame, that will be enough," said the judge. "Would you please sit down and..."

"Your Honor, I'm sure this isn't the first or last time the defendant has been involved in a breach of trust. You can spare me the details of this case; I'm ready to cast my vote. Guilty as charged. Where's the cafeteria?"

There was mumbling and laughter among the jury candidates as the judge banged his gavel. "Quiet!" he warned. "Quiet!"

The plaintiff's attorney stood up, buttoned his jacket and squinted. Solemnly, he stepped toward my friend and leaned over the rail. "Madame," he frowned, "would you mind coming with me the next time I go speed-dating?"

Methods and Mystery

What made my friend so sure of her ability to predict human behavior, and to pull back the curtain of hidden motives? As she'd gladly explain, it was her application of the principles of Chinese face reading. Having categorized each person according to his Five Element behavioral archetype, she looked for telltale facial markings, wrinkles and bony prominences, creating an energetic analog in her mind. It's a method that reaches deep into history.

References to physiognomy in China reach back to 600 B.C., during which the imperial scholar Shu-Fu was noted as an accomplished practitioner of divination. In the early Zhou Dynasty (1122 BC-256 BC), affluent homes retained their own esoteric advisors with whom they consulted before making important decisions. These hereditary advisors practiced six forms of divination, of which face-reading was one. As the feudal Zhou Dynasty crumbled, these sages and their descendents found themselves practicing their art among the populace, disseminating their individual methods. Through the centuries, physiognomy became a popular means of foretelling one's social, financial and health-related destiny and of improving one's fate.

Not surprisingly, dozens of face-reading techniques evolved. These include the Three Forces, in which the forehead represents the sky (honor), the nose represents man (longevity), and the chin represents the earth (abundance). An extension of this technique is the study of the Three Zones. These zones are defined by the hairline to eyebrows; the eyebrows to tip of nose; and the chin area. According to the Song Dynasty text, *Shen Xiang Chuan Bian*, or "Complete Work on Physiognomy," the most harmonious faces were ones in which the Three Zones were equal. Proportional variations might augur favorable circumstances such as wealth and longevity, or suggest poverty in old age, bankruptcy in middle age, and failure to find favor with the king. The cultivation of a moustache and long beard on a man could help to turn his bad luck to good, although a beard without a moustache would do the opposite. The placement of facial moles was also significant, and moles were mapped according to the bearer's gender. Women's moles held the promise of high drama: they might foretell great wealth in the raising of silkworms, or warn against the probability of killing one's husband or of dying in a foreign land.

Techniques for examining the face also included evaluation of 13 horizontal bands (each of them containing as many as 11 descriptive subsections), as well as the facial Five Planets, the facial Six Stars, Five Sacred Mountains and Four Great Rivers (all of them actual celestial and geographic landmarks). Evaluation according to the Five Elements (water, wood, fire, earth and metal) also was important and continues to be employed by Chinese medical practitioners as an amazingly accurate method of assessing health and character. Nevertheless, as with any art, there is variation within these methods of interpretation.

Thinking in Pictures

The concept of emblematic landmarks (the Yellow River represents the eyes, the hallowed Hengshan Mountain represents the forehead, etc.) residing on the face is one of the features that sets Chinese physiognomy apart from the entire Western notion of cosmology. This difference in cognition may have been fostered by the Chinese language.

In his article, "Cognitive Power of Chinese Characters and Their Influence on Ancient Chinese Science and Technology,"¹ Ding Xinghua stated:

"To write and think with characters that preserve a very close analogy with what is in the physical world is to suggest continually that the user and nature inhabit the same close system; by contrast, alphabetic systems continually emphasize isolation of knower and known. As a consequence, emphasis on oneness of man and nature, or man's harmony with nature is a very important consideration in the Chinese approach to nature."

It isn't surprising that while the Chinese were finding actual images on the face, Westerners were spelling out words across that same terrain. In Dante's *The Inferno*, the letters OMO DEI (man is of God) become visible in the architecture of facial bone and cartilage as the musculature of condemned sinners wastes away.

While the Chinese concept of man's oneness with the universe may be incompatible with Western sensibility, there is one element that face-reading traditions share with the West – the accessibility of self-determination. Within the framework of unalterable destiny, humans are free to influence their own fate. The possibility for self-determination and redemption was manifested in the grand sense by the ancient "Mandate of Heaven," in which divinely appointed rulers and clans retained power only as long as they conducted themselves honorably. In the microcosm of individual self-determination, the possibility was, and is, manifested in the interplay of opposites. Markings may portend a favorable or unfavorable destiny, but they can be modulated by contrasting ones. In fact, this pairing of opposites is what breathes life into the art of Chinese face-reading.

The compatibility of opposites is explained by historian Jacques Gernet in the book *An Introduction to Chinese Culture Through the Family*:

"At every level, meaning stems from the way terms are combined. No doubt this is what accounts for the predominant role played by complementary pairs of opposites and correspondences in Chinese thought and above all for its fundamental relativism. Nothing has meaning except through opposition to its contrary."²

How, then, does this meaning come to life in actual practice? Imagine a person whose facial markings show childhood trauma and victimization. Look more closely and notice if this person has markings that connote a sense of irony, an appreciation of extraordinary or exquisite concepts, or a desire to bring justice into the world. These ennobling qualities would contrast with the theme of victimization and may have sprung from it. The polarized themes of victimization and transformation would live side by side on a person's face and would provide insight into the person's character. Of course, childhood misery doesn't ennoble everyone. In some cases, the opposing themes of helplessness and overcompensation might appear.

Facing the Future

If Westerners are increasingly fascinated by Chinese face reading, it might be because our identities as individuals and as a nation are morphing at an alarming rate. The Dec. 16, 2006 cover of *Time* magazine inadvertently said it all. Instead of proclaiming its customary "Person of the Year," the magazine awarded the honor to the entire Internet-savvy American public. The cover featured what was supposed to be a computer screen, but was actually a framed scrap of foil, providing us with a blurry, distorted self-image, emblazoned with the word *You*. What could be more succinct? The uncertainty of a nation in conflict, the fluctuating economy, and the decreasing accessibility of education and medical services all conspire to increase our communal sense of discomfort and anxiety. Which of us wouldn't appreciate additional insight into our durability? It isn't asking too much. As enthusiastic adapters of native traditions, we might find that Chinese face-reading brings us insight and revelations that we had overlooked and that, in our own small way, our choices really do change our fate.

Conclusion

If we examine the notion of an increased interest on the part of the average Westerner in this ancient divinatory art, a curious irony would seem to present itself. Charles Yarborough suggests that, in having a greater knowledge of our own physiognomy as a manifestation of our individual character and destiny, particularly as they relate to personal longevity, we will find stability in an ever-changing and seemingly inhospitable environment. However, at the same time, one cannot overlook the fact that at no time in the history of Western civilization have more people sought to deny the basic nature of who they are,

particularly as they ripen into maturity in the natural course of their lives.

The omnipresent cult of cosmetic surgery and related procedures as a panacea for the all-too-human experience of aging has, as its inevitable adjunct, the elimination of individual character in favor of an idealized "template" of "commercialized" beauty. I am reminded of a classic episode of Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone*, titled "Number 12 Looks Just Like You," in which a certain young lady, somewhat less than model-gorgeous, is at variance with the societal norm of Transformation (a procedure to which everyone submits as they enter into adulthood), choosing from a somewhat limited repertoire of physical somatotypes, all of which conform to "acceptable" standards of attractiveness.

While she initially resists this culturally mandated rite of passage, she eventually succumbs to the assumption of a corporeal husk that bears no relation to her individual character (and which, presumably, is immune to the ravages of time). When this particular episode originally aired in 1964, such a cloning of beauty was a decidedly far-fetched notion. However, in these early years of the 21st century, due to the efforts of the cosmetic surgery industry, there is an increasing mass-production of feminine "facsimiles."

The practitioner of constitutional facial acupuncture renewal, in alignment with the tenets of Oriental medicine, seeks to honor the dignity of the patient's years and accumulated knowledge through realigning them with their core essence, rather than merely rearranging their epidermis and bone structure in order to achieve a desired effect. In this manner, personal identity is preserved, and having chosen to undertake a personal pilgrimage of spiritual commitment in the service of authentic renewal, the patient's singular wisdom and life experience may radiate forth from a face that provides a mirror of their unique, inner beauty.

One can only hope that a burgeoning fascination with the delineation of individual character informed by the ancient insights of Chinese face reading may provide an impetus for people to forego the quick fixes and pursue more holistic alternatives.

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