

The Characters' Efforts to Save Face in Zhao Xin's Short Story 剃脑袋 *Tì Nǎodai* (Skull Shave)

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ABSTRACT

The short story *Skull Shave* (剃脑袋 *Tì Nǎodai*) by Zhao Xin (2012) narrates the experience of the character "I", an eight-year-old boy named Er Xiao, who fears having his hair shaved. The story focuses on the interactions among three main characters: Er Xiao, his father, and Uncle Qingshui, the barber, which closely relate to the concept of *face*, self-image, shame, prestige, and social honor in Chinese culture. This research aims to explore how these three characters attempt to save face and how their efforts impact their interactions, reflecting the social and cultural values of Chinese society. Using both intrinsic and extrinsic approaches, the analysis focuses on the characters' actions, dialogues, and attitudes in the story, as well as the cultural significance of face in Chinese sociocultural contexts. The findings indicate that the characters' efforts to maintain face affect their relationships and convey a moral message on the importance of preserving harmony in social relations. The story also highlights Zhao Xin's perceptiveness in capturing rural life, particularly through a child's perspective. Through its simple narrative, the short story is able to elevate the social and cultural realities of Chinese society into a literary work.

KEYWORDS

face; harmony; short story; Skull Shave; social interaction

INTRODUCTION

Zhao Xin (赵新) is a Chinese writer born in Fuping, Hebei Province, in 1939. After earning a bachelor's degree in Chinese literature from Hebei Beijing Normal University in 1963, he began his career as a secondary school teacher in Fuping. He later served as a cultural officer at the Fuping Cultural Center and as an information officer in the Propaganda Department of the Fuping County Party Committee. In 1971, Zhao began his professional writing career at the Baoding Regional Bureau of Culture. Over the course of his career, he held various positions, including government editor in Baoding and head of the Baoding Writers'

Association in 1994 (Mu & Smith, 2017). He started publishing his works in 1964 and became a member of the China Writers Association¹ in 1982².

Before the Cultural Revolution³, Zhao Xin's writing career began with stories that highlighted virtuously upright individuals and virtuous deeds (好人好事 *Hǎo rén hǎo shì*)⁴. However, the start of the Cultural Revolution brought his literary activities to a halt. Several years later, when he resumed writing, he was confronted with the impact the Cultural Revolution had left on the economy, social order, and people's lives. The psychological trauma experienced by society as a result of the revolution was too severe to be ignored. Therefore, Zhao felt driven to redirect the focus of his work toward exposing various social problems, inspired by the hopes of the rural people, his sense of responsibility as a writer, and his conscience as an intellectual (Li, 1988).

Zhao Xin is characterized by a writing style that is simple, concise, and realistic. He demonstrates a perceptive sensitivity to the realities of life, particularly those of rural communities, which he skillfully incorporates into his literary works. His writings reflect a deep devotion to his hometown and to rural society, portraying characters that are vividly drawn and intimately connected with rural values⁵. Moreover, Zhao Xin is widely recognized for his boldness in representing social realities, especially the injustices and corruption prevalent in the countryside. Although his prose uses a plain and unembellished style, his works consistently convey moral messages and frequently reveal the beauty inherent in everyday life. Zhao Xin also demonstrates mastery in interweaving humor with tragedy as a means of delivering social critique. Two defining characteristics of his works are the exposure of social problems and the representation of communal life (Zhang, 2004). Zhao Xin's novels include 张王李赵 *Zhāng Wáng Lǐ Zhào* (1983) and 婚姻小事 *Hūnyīn Xiǎoshì* (1995). In addition, he also authored several short story collections, among them 庄稼观点 *Zhuāngjià Guāndiǎn* (1982), 被开除的村庄 *Bèi Kāichú de Cūnzhuāng* (1991), 二月八, 乱穿衣 *Èr Yuè Bā, Luàn Chuān Yī*, and 河东河西 *Hédōng Héxī*. In his literary career, Zhao Xin has increasingly concentrated on shorter forms of fiction, particularly short stories. Among his works are 剃脑袋 *Tì Nǎodai* (2012), 一日三餐 *Yī Rì Sān Cān*, and 水到渠成 *Shuǐ Dào Qúchéng*. He has published more than ten volumes dedicated to short stories, including 赵新小小说 100 篇 *Zhào Xīn Xiǎo Xiǎoshuō 100 piān* (2005), 鸡不叫, 天也明 *Jī Bù Jiào, Tiān Yě Míng* (2009), and 拉着小车散步 *Lāzhe Xiǎochē Sǎnbù* (2014). Throughout his career, Zhao Xin has received numerous literary awards, among them the Lifetime Achievement Award for Short-Short Story Writing (2013), the First Wuling Short-

¹The Chinese Writers Association (中国作家协会 *Zhōngguó Zuòjiā Xiéhuì*) is a national-level official organization established by the Chinese Communist Party to bring together writers from various ethnic groups across China. Its objectives are to advance literature, reinforce socialist values, and serve as a bridge between the government and the literary community. Its strategic roles include ideological education, literary development, the organization of prestigious awards, and the facilitation of literary exchanges at both national and international levels (Source: <https://www.chinawriter.com.cn/zxjg/> accessed July 6, 2025).

²中国作家网 *Zhōngguó Zuòjiā Wǎng*. (2016). Retrieved January 19, 2025, from <https://www.chinawriter.com.cn/n1/2016/0627/c404953-28496606.html>

³The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was a movement launched by the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, Mao Zedong. Its aimed to strengthen communist ideology, combat corruption among officials, and promote the revolutionary spirit, which in turn led to social and political upheaval in China (Source: https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/introduction_to_the_cultural_revolution accessed May 3, 2025)

⁴好人好事 (*Hǎo rén hǎo shì*) is a Mandarin expression referring to good people and good deeds. Literally, 好人 (*hǎo rén*) means a person who behaves well or does good, while 好事 (*hǎo shì*) refers to a good deed or an action beneficial to others and to society (Source: <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%A5%BD%E4%BA%BA%E5%A5%BD%E4%BA%8B/3562358> accessed May 3, 2025)

⁵Liang, Zhoujie (梁周杰). (2022). 河北阜平籍作家赵新向家乡赠书 *Héběi Fùpíng Jí Zuòjiā Zhào Xīn Xiàng Jiāxiāng Zèng Shū*. Retrieved January 19, 2025, from <https://www.heb.chinanews.com.cn/ylxc/20220815426262.shtml>

Short Story Book of the Year Award (2014), and the Annual Award for Chinese Mini-Fiction.

One particularly significant work among Zhao Xin's writings is the short story 剃脑袋 *Tì Nǎodai* (Skull Shave), published in 2012. The story narrates the experience of "I", an eight-year-old boy named Er Xiao, who is fearful of having his hair cut. As he is required to enroll in school, and at the teacher's request, he must undergo a haircut, driving his father to invite the best barber in the village, Uncle Qingshui. During the haircut, Er Xiao experiences pain and complains, which angers Uncle Qingshui, who feels that his reputation as a skilled barber has been damaged. Consequently, he leaves Er Xiao with his head only half shaved. Shortly thereafter, however, Uncle Qingshui realizes his own fault and returns to complete the haircut.

This short story portrays the interaction among three main characters, Er Xiao, his father, and Uncle Qingshui, each of whom demonstrates a different way of dealing with issues related to face. The concept of face in Chinese society, which refers to honor, self-image, or social prestige, is known as *Miàn* (*Miànzi* 面子) and *Liǎn* (脸). *Miànzi* 面子, which literally means "face", represents one of the essential values in Chinese culture. Its meaning extends beyond physical appearance, encompassing one's image, reputation, and social honor in the eyes of others (Cheng, 1986). According to Buckley et al. (2006), *mianzi* 面子 or "face" refers to the respect or recognition granted by others toward an individual's social status. *Miànzi* 面子 reflects a person's dignity, self-respect, and social acknowledgment, all of which must be maintained in interpersonal interactions, as they play a crucial role in fostering harmonious relationships. In social interaction, *mianzi* 面子 can be influenced by one's social status, the behavior of others, or broader societal circumstances (Qi, 2017).

Meanwhile, *lian* 脸 represents the aspect of face that is more self-oriented. It reflects personal integrity, a sense of shame, and an individual's responsibility toward moral values. Losing *lian* 脸 means losing one's moral dignity and self-respect, which is emotionally experienced as a sense of shame. In contrast to *mianzi* 面子, which emphasizes recognition and self-image in the eyes of others, *lian* 脸 is rooted in the moral values upheld by an individual and is closely associated with honesty, responsibility, and propriety. Although distinct, *mianzi* 面子 and *lian* 脸 are inseparable, as they complement each other in shaping the ways individuals maintain face in social interaction (Shi et al., 2011).

In relation to face, several interrelated concepts can be identified, such as losing face, saving face, and giving face. These concepts define the various strategies employed in social interaction to preserve or restore an individual's reputation, status, and honor within society (Tammy, 2018). Beyond serving merely as social norms in daily life, the value of face is also reflected in Chinese literary works, which show how this concept shapes the dynamics of relationships among characters.

Several previous scholars have conducted studies on the short story *Skull Shave*. Indira Novianti (2021), in her undergraduate thesis titled *Representation of The Time Situation (1947) in Zhao Xin's Short Story "Shaving Skull" 剃脑袋*, analyzed the story using both intrinsic and extrinsic approaches. Intrinsically, the story presents a distinctive rural atmosphere, reflecting Zhao Xin's characteristic style as a writer of rural literature, while also conveying a moral message about the restraint of expressing pain or suffering in public. Extrinsically, the story represents the situation in China in 1947 through symbols such as head shaving and pig slaughtering, which illustrate the government's treatment of the people. Furthermore, Uncle Qingshui's actions toward "I" suggest that although he acknowledges his mistake, he remains unwilling to admit it in front of others. He even urges the boy to endure the pain and to refrain from revealing it to anyone.

Aili Mu and Mike Smith (2017), in their book *Contemporary Chinese Short-Short Stories: A Parallel Text*, examine contemporary Chinese short stories with a focus on the application of Confucian ethics in daily life. One of the stories discussed in this book is Zhao Xin's *Skull Shave*. In their analysis, Mu and Smith illustrate how a child begins to understand the social norms within his community. In Confucian ethics, 礼 *lǐ* (ritual propriety) is practiced in order to realize 仁 *rén* (benevolence), thereby fostering harmonious relationships within society. The story highlights the importance of maintaining interpersonal relations and avoiding conflict in community life.

Zhang Tongjian (2004), in his article 赵新小说创作论 *Zhào Xīn Xiǎoshuō Chuàngzuò Lùn*, published in the *Journal of Baoding Teachers College*, identifies the distinctive features of Zhao Xin's writings as those of a "peasant writer" or "writer of rural literature"⁶. Although this article does not specifically discuss the short story *Skull Shave*, it emphasizes that simplicity and closeness to the lives of ordinary people are the main characteristics of Zhao Xin's works, whether in terms of theme, character, plot, or language. The beauty found in simplicity, together with the deep meanings underlying seemingly ordinary stories, is also emphasized as a defining strength of his literary creations.

From the three studies discussed above, it is evident that social, cultural, and communal values in Chinese society, particularly those related to rural conditions, constitute dominant elements in Zhao Xin's works. These studies highlight how the short story *Skull Shave* reflects socio-political conditions, the application of Confucian ethics, as well as simplicity and its connection with the common people.

However, upon a close reading of the story, the present author discovers that the concept of face has not been extensively studied in previous research. In this story, face plays an important role in character interactions, influencing how each character manages conflicts and the strategies they employ to preserve dignity in front of others. This analysis raises the question of how the three characters attempt to save face in *Skull Shave*, and how such efforts shape their interactions while reflecting broader social and cultural values in Chinese society. Accordingly, this research aims to analyze the strategies used by each character to save face, as well as their impact on interpersonal dynamics and behavior within the narrative. The research shows that the concept of face, as represented through the characters' dialogues and narrative expressions, represents significant social and cultural meanings.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a descriptive-analytical method, as it is appropriate for the research objective, which focuses on describing and analyzing the events experienced by the characters in the story. The research begins by identifying and describing excerpts from Zhao Xin's short story *Skull Shave*, followed by an analysis of these excerpts. For data collection, this research adopts a library research method to obtain supporting materials relevant to the topic. The primary data consist of narrative excerpts and dialogues from *Skull Shave*, while the secondary data are drawn from various literary sources, including books, journals, related articles, and previous studies on the short story.

The approach of this research contains two main aspects: intrinsic and extrinsic. The intrinsic approach analyzes the elements within the short story that relate to the concept of face, such as the characters' actions, dialogues, and attitudes in saving or losing face. Meanwhile, the extrinsic approach addresses the concept of face in Chinese culture,

⁶ Zhao Xin is recognized as one of the rural writers (农村作家 *Nóngcūn Zuòjiā*) whose works belong to the genre of *xiāngtǔ wénxué* (乡土文学), or rural literature. This literary genre developed in the aftermath of the Literary Revolution triggered by the May Fourth Movement of 1919. Its main characteristic lies in the depiction of village life as well as social and cultural issues within rural communities (Yang & Meng, 2021).

including the meanings of saving, losing, and giving face within a social context, and relates these cultural dimensions to the analysis of the short story.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The short story *Skull Shave* features three main characters, Er Xiao, his father, and Uncle Qingshui, each of whom plays an important role in shaping and directing the narrative's overall development. Although their levels of involvement differ, each character contributes to the story's progression. The characterization in the short story is presented through two approaches: directly, through the narrator's descriptions, and indirectly, through dialogue, actions, and the dynamics that occur within the story's circumstances.

This research is divided into two main sections. The first discusses the characterization of the characters in *Skull Shave*. The second analyzes the concept of face in Chinese culture and how this concept is embodied in the interactions among the characters in the story. The analysis of each character is classified into three stages: the character's initial condition, the process of development they experience, and the manner in which they engage and respond to conflict or change throughout the narrative. By integrating the intrinsic analysis of characterization, dialogue, and actions with the extrinsic framework of the Chinese concept of face, this research aims to reveal how cultural values influence individual behavior and social interaction within the narrative.

1. "I" or Er Xiao (二小): Challenges and the Feeling of Shame

Er Xiao is an eight-year-old boy living in a village in 1947. He serves as both the protagonist and the narrator of the story, narrating the events from his own perspective. His role is crucial, as the entire narrative develops through his experiences, particularly those related to his fear of getting his hair shaved and the resulting sense of shame or *lian*.

1.1 The Obligation to Shave the Head

我小时候理发不叫理发，叫剃脑袋；村子里不管谁的头发长长了(当然他得是个男人或者男孩)，一律要拿刀子剃，一律要把脑袋剃得精光精光。剃的过程很简单：在锅里烧上两瓢水，水热了，舀到脸盆里，把头发来来回回洗一洗，然后往墙根儿一坐，给你剃脑袋的人就下了刀子。他们手里的刀子都是铁刀子笨刀子，刀背厚，刀刃又钝，那不是剃而是刮，咯吱吱，咯吱吱，一刀一刀挖下去疼得入骨，疼得钻心！

When I was a child, getting a haircut was not called getting a haircut; instead, it was called shaving the head. In the village, whenever a man's or a boy's hair grew long, it was always shaved completely bald with a knife. The process was simple: two ladles of water were boiled in a pot, then poured into a basin to wash the hair back and forth. After that, one would sit against the wall, and the person shaving the head would begin. Their knives were heavy, clumsy iron blades, thick at the back and blunt at the edge. What they did was not shaving but scraping: ge zhi zhi, ge zhi zhi, each stroke gouging into the scalp, the pain cutting deep into the bones, piercing straight to the heart.

Er Xiao is confronted with the condition of shaving his head despite his fear and discomfort. He associates the process not with grooming but with violence, even comparing it to the slaughter of pigs. This illustrates how he perceives the act of shaving as brutal and painful.

Ordinarily, the term 理发 *Lǐfǎ* is used to refer to the act of getting a haircut. However, Er Xiao consistently uses 剃脑袋 *Tì nǎodai*, which carries a harsher and more negative connotation. This lexical choice reveals both his fear and his deep discomfort with the experience.

我是村里最怕剃脑袋的人。看见有人剃脑袋，我就想到了杀猪，猪被杀死之后要用开水烫，然后把毛刮下来，露出白嫩的肚皮和脊梁，和人剃脑袋有些相仿。可是害怕剃也得剃呀，想躲也躲不过去呀！

I was the person in the village who feared having my head shaved the most. Whenever I saw someone else being shaved, I thought of slaughtering a pig: after the animal is killed, it is scalded with boiling water and its bristles scraped off, revealing the pale, tender belly and backbone, a scene not unlike a human head being shaved. But fear or no fear, one still had to be shaved, there was nowhere to hide!

His fear is reinforced by the social environment: shaving one's head was considered required before entering school. Moreover, Er Xiao had not shaved his head for more than three months, and his father considered his appearance increasingly feminine.

爹说：剃剃看着清秀啊！你三个多月没剃脑袋，看着像个闺女啦！我说闺女就闺女，闺女人家也让上学！

Father said: "Once it's shaved, you'll look neat and tidy! You haven't had your head shaved for more than three months. You're starting to look like a girl!"
I replied: "If I look like a girl, so be it. Girls are allowed to go to school too!"

This conversation reflects the social expectation that boys should maintain a particular hairstyle, distinguishing them from girls and projecting discipline. Long hair, for boys, was seen as incompatible with prevailing norms in the village, especially for school-aged children. In this context, hairstyle was tied not only to appearance but also to broader concepts of discipline and social conformity.

Although initially unwilling, Er Xiao finally agrees to have his head shaved, as it was not merely a personal choice but an external requirement.

爹说：二小，是学校的老师让你剃脑袋的，老师说给我好几回啦。你剃不剃？

我含着满眼的泪水和爹达成了协议：第一，剃。……

Father said: "Er Xiao, it is your teacher who asked you to shave your head. The teacher has told me several times already. So, are you going to shave or not?"
With my eyes brimming with tears, I reached an agreement with Father: first, I would shave...

This decision shows that Er Xiao's compliance does not occur from his own will but from social and institutional requests, mediated through parental authority. As both a son and a student, he had no real choice but to surrender. Thus, the obligation to shave reflects how individual discomfort must be placed aside in favor of aligning with collective customs and traditions within his community.

1.2. Losing Face

During the head-shaving process carried out by Uncle Qingshui, Er Xiao showed both fear and discomfort. His fear was expressed not only through his words but also through physical reactions to the pain. The following quotations, drawn from different parts of the story, illustrate how he verbalized and expressed his distress:

我非常紧张。我说：大叔，我胆小.....
I was extremely nervous. I said, "Uncle, I'm timid ..."

他一刀下来，我的脑袋上沙的一声，一绺头发落在了我的衣襟上。我又毫无缘由地想起了杀猪刮毛的场景，身子就抖了一下。

As soon as the first stroke came down, there was a sha sound on my scalp, and a lock of hair fell onto my collar. For no reason at all, the image of scalding and scraping a slaughtered pig came to mind again, and my body shuddered.

我怯怯地说：疼！
Timidly, I said: "It hurts!"

我说：真疼。哎呀，越来越疼！
I said: "It really hurts. Ah, it hurts more and more!"

Er Xiao's repeated complaints disrupted the shaving process, which resulted in an unfinished haircut. Uncle Qingshui, frustrated by the boy's constant complaints, abandoned the task, leaving Er Xiao's head only half-shaved.

清水大叔扬长而去，我的脑袋刚刚剃了一半。
院子里的人嘻嘻哈哈地走了，留下一只母鸡在那里悠闲地转悠。
摸着我的“一半一半”，那天下午我没敢出门。

*Uncle Qingshui strode away, leaving my head only half-shaved.
The people in the courtyard drifted off, laughing and chatting, leaving behind only a hen leisurely wandering about.
Touching the "half-and-half" on my head, I did not dare to step outside that entire afternoon.*

This unfinished haircut made Er Xiao the object of ridicule among the villagers. The situation caused him to lose face or *diū liǎn* (丢脸), experiencing shame and embarrassment in front of the community members who had witnessed the scene. As suggested by Kim & Nam (1998), the loss of face often leads to withdrawal from social interaction and avoidance of further exposure to shame. This is reflected in Er Xiao's behavior, who feels too embarrassed to leave the house for the rest of the afternoon. Through this episode, the story emphasizes how the experience of losing face directly affects one's willingness to participate in everyday social life. In Er Xiao's case, his sense of embarrassment became strong enough to change his behavior and isolate him from his peers and neighbors, emphasizing the social consequences of face in Chinese society.

1.3. Er Xiao's Attempt to Save Face

When Uncle Qingshui returned to finish the haircut that he had previously left, he asked whether the shaving had caused pain. In this situation, Er Xiao responded differently compared to his earlier reactions, as seen in the following excerpt:

于是我又坐在了板凳上，清水大叔又拿起了一把剃头刀。
明亮的月辉里，大叔问我：二小，疼么？
爹在旁边咳嗽一声，我赶紧说：不疼，不疼，挺舒服！

So I sat down on the stool again, and Uncle Qingshui picked up the shaving knife once more.

In the bright moonlight, he asked me: "Er Xiao, does it hurt?"

Father gave a cough from the side, and I hurried to reply: "It doesn't hurt, it doesn't hurt, it actually feels fine!"

In the previous part, Er Xiao clearly showed his fear and repeatedly complained of pain during the haircut, but in this excerpt, he restrained himself and chose not to express his pain. This response appeared after his father gave a cough, which served as a subtle signal for him to respond "properly" and maintain dignity. This shows that Er Xiao chose to conceal his feelings and not express them directly in front of Uncle Qingshui to save himself from embarrassment and to show respect toward Uncle Qingshui.

2. Father (爹): Responsibility as a Parent and Dignity

The father, whose name is Zhao Qinghe (赵清和), first appears in the story when he asks Er Xiao to have his hair cut in preparation for entering school. This request then triggers a series of events that lead to the loss of face for the other two main characters, namely Er Xiao and Uncle Qingshui. Although the father himself does not directly experience either loss or save face, his role in the story is important. He serves as a mediator in the conflict between his son and the barber. Therefore, the stages of analysis regarding the father differ from those of the other two characters, as the narrative focuses more on the father as a mediating figure for both his son and the barber.

2.1. The Father's Request to Er Xiao as a Trigger

1947年我长到了八岁。那年夏天我该上学了。
爹知道我害怕剃脑袋。爹和我商量说：二小，眼看你要上学了，把你的脑袋剃剃吧！

In 1947, I turned eight years old. That summer, it was time for me to start school.

Father knew that I was afraid of having my head shaved. He said to me: "Er Xiao, since you'll be starting school soon, let's shave your head!"

At the beginning of the story, the father asks Er Xiao to have his hair cut because of a request from the school and because Er Xiao is about to enter school. As a parent, the father has the responsibility to ensure that his child's appearance is neat and in accordance with the traditions of the village at that time. This aligns with Chinese traditions influenced by Confucianism, in which the patriarchal family structure reinforces the father's dominant role, including in matters of social status, decision-making, and child-rearing responsibilities (Chang et al., 2011). In addition, the father also holds authority as the head of the family, ensuring that his child listens to and respects his decisions. Therefore, the father seeks to

persuade Er Xiao to be willing to have his hair cut. The father's request then becomes the trigger for the situation that leads to the loss of face for both Er Xiao and Uncle Qingshui.

2.2. The Father's Attempt to Save Face

When Uncle Qingshui became angry because he felt his reputation and name were diminished due to Er Xiao's constant complaints of pain during the haircut, the father acted as a mediator between them. This can be seen in the following quotation:

爹赶紧伸手拉他：兄弟，你别和我家二小一般见识，他还是个孩子....

Father quickly reached out to pull him (Uncle Qingshui) back: "Brother, do not be angry with Er Xiao, he is still a child..."

From the quotation above, it can be seen that the father tried to calm Uncle Qingshui, who was angry, by saying that Er Xiao was still a child, so his behavior could be understood or forgiven because he had not fully learned the importance of saving another person's face. This response shows that the father attempted to save Uncle Qingshui's reputation or face in front of others, particularly in the eyes of the villagers who witnessed the incident. As a parent, he also took the responsibility of protecting the dignity and honor of his family, especially in situations involving outsiders such as Uncle Qingshui. Furthermore, the father was also responsible for finding a solution to handle the problem that occurred after the unfinished haircut.

爹下地之前给我说，别哭别闹别上火，晚上他一定想办法，把我那半个脑袋上的头发剃干净。

Before going out to the fields, Father said to me, "Don't cry, don't make a fuss, and don't get upset. This evening, I'll definitely find a way to finish shaving the hair on that half of your head."

In general, a father is responsible for protecting his child. In the short story, the father protected Er Xiao by trying to find a solution to restore his son's face or sense of shame caused by the unfinished haircut. He sought ways to completely shave Er Xiao's remaining hair so that his appearance would become neat again. This action shows the father's responsibility in protecting the dignity and honor of his family. The father also represents the cultural significance of *bǎoquán miàn* (保全面), protecting the dignity and honor of his family and others in society.

3. Uncle Qingshui (清水大叔): The Barber and Social Prestige

Uncle Qingshui is the most well-known barber in the village. He is respected for his skills and good reputation in the eyes of the villagers, which suggests that he holds a high degree of social honor. This is obvious from the large number of villagers who gathered to witness the haircutting process, including the moment when he was asked to cut Er Xiao's hair. The presence and role of Uncle Qingshui in this short story are as significant as those of the other two characters, for it is through him that the values of prestige or social dignity, as well as the dynamics of social relationships, are represented.

3.1. Response During Er Xiao's Haircut

During the haircut, Er Xiao showed fear, while Uncle Qingshui appeared very confident, believing that there was nothing to be afraid of. Uncle Qingshui's reaction to Er Xiao's fear

illustrates the difference in how both of them perceived the situation. The following excerpts from the story, taken from different parts, show Uncle Qingshui's responses and attitude:

我在板凳上坐着，清水大叔在我眼前立着。他围着我转了一圈，然后用手拍拍我的后背说：挺直了，把腰挺直了！男子汉，你怕什么？

I sat on the stool while Uncle Qingshui stood before me. He walked around me once, then patted me on the back and said: "Sit up straight, keep your back straight! You're a man, what are you afraid of?"

他哈哈大笑，把刀子一晃：胆小什么？我剃脑袋不疼！

He laughed heartily, gave the knife a shake, and said: "What's there to be timid about? When I shave a head, it doesn't hurt!"

清水大叔不高兴了：你抖什么？你抖什么？

Uncle Qingshui became displeased and said: "Why are you trembling? Why are you trembling?"

清水大叔更不高兴了，连着给我刮了几刀：你大声说，是真疼还是假疼？

Uncle Qingshui, becoming even more displeased, scraped me several times in succession: "Say it loudly, does it really hurt, or not?"

From the excerpts above, it can be seen that Uncle Qingshui showed confidence during the haircutting process. He believed that his technique would not cause pain, while at the same time expecting Er Xiao to remain calm. However, instead of comforting Er Xiao, who was fearful, he became angry and offended when Er Xiao showed fear and complained of pain.

3.2. Losing Face

The peak of Uncle Qingshui's anger occurred when Er Xiao continued to complain of pain, which caused Uncle Qingshui to lose his patience. He eventually stopped the haircutting process and left Er Xiao with only half of his head shaved.

清水大叔恼怒了，收起刀子对我爹说：赵清和，你看见了吧？当着这么多乡亲的面，你儿子砸我的牌子，坏我的名声，臭我的手艺，这脑袋我不剃了！我剃过的脑袋比地里的西瓜都多，谁说过疼？

Uncle Qingshui became angry. Putting away the knife, he said to my father, "Zhao Qinghe, you saw it yourself, didn't you? In front of all these villagers, your son has ruined my reputation, sullied my name, and discredited my skill. I won't shave this head! I've shaved more heads than there are watermelons in the fields. Who has ever said it hurt?"

Uncle Qingshui's actions show his frustration, as he felt humiliated and lost his honor as the village's most trusted barber. His reputation as a skilled and respected professional formed an essential part of his identity and dignity. Therefore, when Er Xiao expressed fear

and repeatedly complained of pain in front of many villagers, it was regarded as an insult to his expertise and reputation. The external loss of reputation directly translates into the experience of *diū miàn* (丢面), showing how social identity is collectively constructed.

3.3. Uncle Qingshui's Attempt to Save Face

After the incident with the unfinished haircut, Uncle Qingshui took the initiative to visit Er Xiao's house that same evening and apologized directly to his father. The following excerpt shows Uncle Qingshui acknowledging his own mistake and attempting to ease the situation:

那天晚上月亮很大很圆。我们刚放下饭碗，清水大叔就气喘吁吁地跑到我们家里来了。他给爹深深地施了一个礼说：哥啊，对不起，难怪孩子说疼呢，原来是我拿错了剃脑袋的刀子——这把旧刀子我好几年不使了，孩子能不疼吗？

That night, the moon was large and full. We had just set down our rice bowls when Uncle Qingshui came running into our home, panting for breath. He bowed deeply to Father and said, "Brother, I'm sorry. No wonder the child said it hurt, turns out I had picked up the wrong shaving knife—This old knife hasn't been used in years, how could it not have hurt the boy?"

The excerpt above shows that Uncle Qingshui sought to restore his social relationship with Er Xiao's father and Er Xiao, as well as to recover Er Xiao's face, which had been damaged earlier in public. By admitting his mistake in using a worn-out tool, Uncle Qingshui not only reestablished his reputation as a barber but also gave Er Xiao space not to be blamed for complaining of pain, thus validating the child's feelings. This act shows his attempt to preserve his own dignity while also considering the feelings of others involved in the incident.

At the end of the story, Uncle Qingshui explained to Er Xiao the importance of saving face in social situations:

清水大叔说：疼就忍着点儿，剃脑袋哪有不疼的？他们说疼那是糊弄我，抬举我，他们有他们的用心；不过就是疼，你也不能当着大伙儿面说，你懂这个道理吗？

Uncle Qingshui said, "If it hurts, just endure it. When has shaving a head ever been painless? When others say it doesn't hurt, they're only humoring me, flattering me, they each have their own reasons. But even if it does hurt, you still mustn't say so in front of everyone. Do you understand that principle?"

This shows that in social situations, even if a person feels pain or discomfort, they must restrain themselves from expressing it publicly. While others may pretend not to feel pain as a sign of respect, this does not mean the pain is absent. What is more important, however, is the principle of not expressing one's pain in front of others, as doing so can damage one's image and reputation. Therefore, from the excerpt above, it can be concluded that saving face or dignity is more important in sustaining harmonious social relations and gaining the respect of others.

Based on the analysis of the three characters described through three stages, initial condition, the development of conflict, and the response to the conflict, a summary diagram can be constructed to clarify the dynamics of roles and the changes experienced by each character in the story.

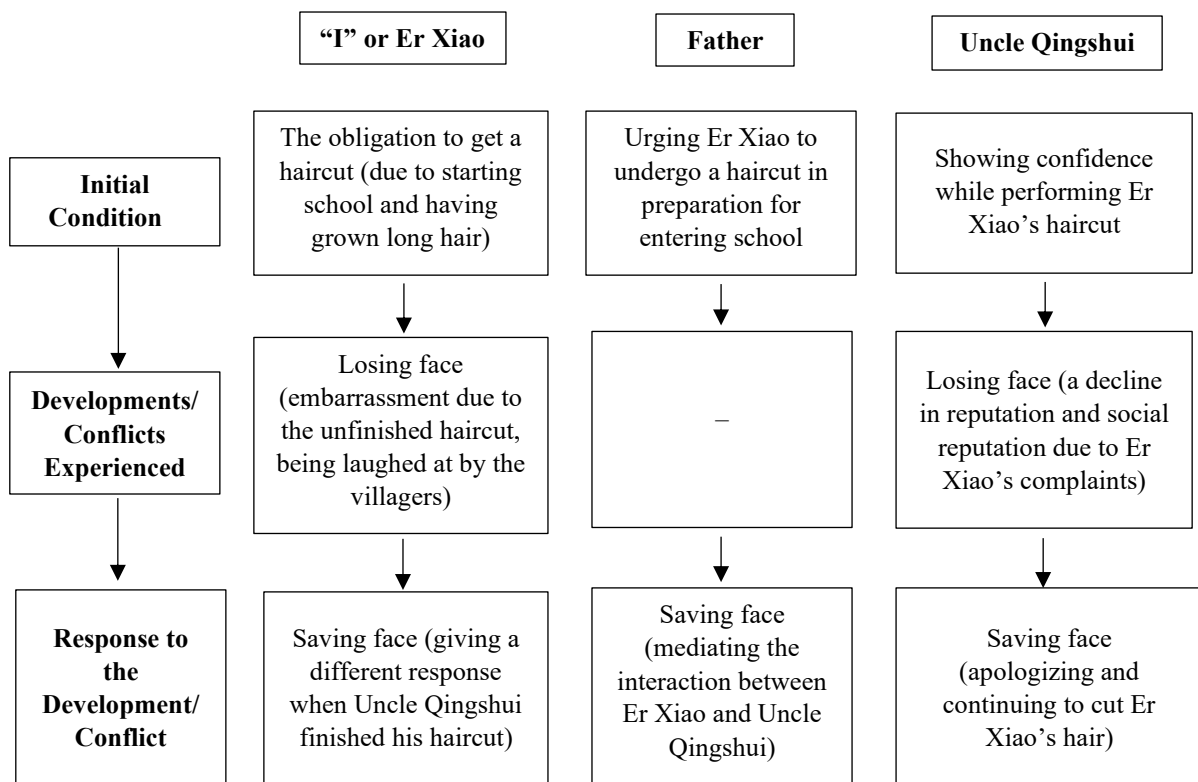


Figure 1. Character Analysis Diagram Based on Three Stages

4. The Concept of Face in Chinese Culture and Its Relation to the Short Story

The previous analysis of the three main characters shows that the narrative’s conflicts and resolutions are closely connected to the concept of face. To understand the broader significance of these interactions, it is necessary to analyze how each moment of shame, restraint, and reconciliation reflects traditional Chinese values regarding dignity and social harmony.

In Zhao Xin’s short story *Skull Shave*, the concept of face plays a significant role in the interactions among the characters. In Chinese culture, face exerts a major influence in shaping each individual’s social identity. Saving face or personal dignity is a deeply rooted value in Chinese social life, shaping behaviors and modes of interaction (Zhai, 2004).

Although not explicitly mentioned, the pressure to save dignity, meet social expectations, and avoid shame is obvious in the actions of the characters. Er Xiao’s decision to have his hair shaved, the father’s attitude toward his son’s appearance, and the interactions with Uncle Qingshui all relate to saving face or dignity in the eyes of others.

In general, there are three types of face in Chinese culture: losing face, saving face, and giving face. These three are connected and can be observed in the characters’ interactions throughout the story.

4.1. Losing Face

In Chinese culture, losing face can be divided into *diū miàn* (丢面) and *diū liǎn* (丢脸). *Diu mian* 丢面 generally describes a situation where someone loses honor or feels humiliated due to shameful actions in public. This phrase is more closely associated with the loss of

social status, reputation, or visible achievements evaluated by others (Shi et al., 2011). In Chinese society, *diu mian* 丢面 is considered shameful and may endanger one's reputation, social status, and even sense of safety within the community. Meanwhile, *diu lian* 丢脸 refers to shame that occurs internally due to violations of personal norms or moral values. The greater the importance of *lian* 脸 to an individual, the stronger the shame caused by *diu lian* 丢脸 (Suh, 2020). Unlike *diu mian* 丢面, which is more external, *diu lian* 丢脸 emphasizes internal aspects such as guilt, embarrassment, and moral self-awareness.

According to Lee (2020), loss of face may occur due to two main factors. First, internal factors, such as when individuals feel ashamed for failing to meet social norms or expectations, or when they perceive themselves as incompetent. Second, external factors, such as when one experiences rejection or public humiliation in front of others.

In the story, both Er Xiao and Uncle Qingshui experience loss of face. Er Xiao feels extremely embarrassed when his head is only half shaved, making him a subject of ridicule among the villagers. His sense of shame can be categorized as *diu lian* 丢脸, as it arises from his personal feeling of humiliation in public. As a child who does not yet fully understand social concepts such as reputation or status, his shame appears purely from self-awareness, realizing that his appearance is unnatural and ridiculed by others. He feels he has failed to meet a simple expectation of appearing "normal", and thus his shame reflects an internal, *lian*-oriented loss of face.

Meanwhile, Uncle Qingshui also experiences loss of face, which can be categorized as *diu mian* 丢面. As a well-known and respected village barber, his reputation relies heavily on public perception of his skills. His loss of face relates to his professional image and reputation in the eyes of the community, making it external and socially oriented. When he failed to perform his task properly, as shown through Er Xiao's complaints during the shaving process, it not only caused personal embarrassment but also risked damaging the villagers' perception of him, potentially undermining his social standing.

4.2. Saving Face

Saving face, or *bǎoquán miàn* (保全面), refers to efforts to preserve or restore honor in front of others. In Chinese culture, saving face often occurs when one's dignity is under threat, even before a complete loss of face takes place. The dynamics of saving face typically arise in negative situations and may involve three forms: saving one's own face, saving another's face, or saving both simultaneously (Wu in Lee, 2020).

In line with this view, Goffman argues that individuals have two orientations in face-work: a defensive orientation to save one's own face and a protective orientation to save the face of others. In this context, a person is not only responsible for their own face but is also socially bound to save the faces of others. Acts of saving another's face may reflect empathy, kindness, or moral satisfaction (Qi, 2011). Thus, saving face is an essential component of social interaction that strengthens individual positions and fosters harmony within society.

In *Skull Shave*, all three characters show attempts to save face. Er Xiao endured pain and claimed not to feel hurt to respect Uncle Qingshui and preserve his dignity. His father mediated the conflict by emphasizing that Er Xiao was still a child and should be excused, thereby saving Uncle Qingshui's face in front of others. Meanwhile, Uncle Qingshui personally visited to apologize and admitted his mistake in choosing the shaving tool, an effort that restored his own dignity while maintaining good relations with Er Xiao's family. These acts show the cultural importance of saving face as a means to uphold social harmony.

4.3. Giving Face

Gěi miàn (给面), literally “to give face”, refers to showing respect to others. This may be done by avoiding public embarrassment or by granting recognition and praise. Such acts reflect a high degree of social awareness regarding hierarchy, status, and interpersonal relations. To give face means to acknowledge another person’s feelings and social status.

In Chinese culture, giving face may take the form of showing praise, offering valuable gifts, or hosting someone at a feast (Sullivan & Liu-Sullivan, 2021). These gestures aim to elevate the recipient’s social status and are often made with the expectation of mutual courtesy. Failure to return may disrupt social relations and even cause tension or conflict (Muas, 2012).

In the story, the concept of giving face is subtly expressed through Er Xiao’s actions. After his painful first haircut, he let himself be shaved again by Uncle Qingshui. This time, he restrained himself and even declared that “it did not hurt”. This statement can be understood as an attempt to allow Uncle Qingshui to restore his dignity as a barber. By saying that the second haircut was not painful, Er Xiao indirectly gave face to the barber and helped recover his image in front of the villagers. His willingness to sacrifice personal comfort for the sake of preserving another’s reputation aligns with the cultural practice of giving face.

The concept of face in Chinese culture emphasizes the importance of preserving dignity, self-respect, and social status. Losing face is regarded as a disgraceful experience that may lead to shame, loss of reputation, and diminished social position. Consequently, individuals strive to save or restore face to maintain a positive self-image. Saving face includes efforts to preserve honor, whether for oneself or for others. Giving face, on the other hand, reflects mutual respect and consideration, eventually fostering balanced and harmonious social relations. Therefore, the concept of face embodies core values in Chinese culture: honor, dignity, and social harmony.

CONCLUSION

Zhao Xin’s short story *Skull Shave* narrates the experience of a boy, Er Xiao, getting his hair shaved in the presence of his father and the village barber, Uncle Qingshui. Although it appears to depict a simple everyday activity, the story highlights the issue of face or personal dignity within interpersonal interactions. Each character, Er Xiao, his father, and Uncle Qingshui, faces situations that threaten their face and strives to save it in different ways.

The concept of face in Chinese culture emphasizes the importance of maintaining dignity, self-respect, and one’s social position. Losing face is regarded as a humiliating experience that may affect a person’s social standing. Therefore, efforts to save face, whether for oneself or for others, serve as approaches to avoid shame, uphold prestige, and preserve honor in social relations.

Accordingly, the concept of face and the attempts to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships presented in the story become essential elements that represent the dynamics of Chinese society. By focusing on the seemingly simple act of shaving one’s head, Zhao Xin explores deeper meanings of ordinary life. The story shows how social values, such as face, shape interpersonal interactions. This simplicity, in fact, constitutes the main strength of Zhao Xin’s *Skull Shave*.

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