

LISTEN TO THE SILENCE—IT SPEAKS: UNDERSTANDING
CHINESE UNIVERSITY STUDENT PERCEPTIONS
OF SILENCE DURING INTERCULTURAL
COMMUNICATION

A Thesis
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to the Faculty of
California State University, Chico

In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts
in
Communication Studies

by
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Spring 2016

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DEDICATION

*To my fellow Chinese international students,
whose voices want to be heard through their silence.*

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ABSTRACT

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The overall goal of this study was to understand the role that silence plays when university students engage in intercultural communication interactions. Twenty college students at California State University, Chico (CSUC): ten international Chinese and ten Americans were interviewed about perceptions of silence in the classroom, and how silence is managed or negotiated. Qualitative interviews were conducted in the subjects' native languages by the bilingual researcher. The responses were analyzed and trends identified using grounded theory. The findings revealed American and Chinese respondents defined the nature of silence differently. An iceberg analogy was constructed

to discuss the influences and implications of the different perceptions of silence between the two cultures. English proficiency, the nature of the background educational system, and the native cultures were three themes which unified the findings and their implications. Although English proficiency was one of the most apparent causes, the prior school experience and, ultimately, *cultural* differences may be much more important influences to silence in culturally diverse conversations and communication in the classroom, but more difficult to ascertain. In a theoretical sense, this research may help the development of intercultural understanding in communication. In a practical sense, its implication offers the teachers, course planners, academic advisers, international student advisors, and students themselves a new way of understanding Chinese students' communication style.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It is hard to believe how quickly time has flown - I find myself at the end of a graduate program in the U.S. As the only foreigner in my graduate communication studies cohort and the only person whose undergraduate degree was not in communication, I vividly recall many moments of intense struggle in the American academic setting. I was silent a lot in class compared to my American cohorts, although normally I consider myself an outgoing person and thoroughly committed to school. Self-doubt, low self-esteem, faltering confidence, and questioning my new identity were my constant companions. Working in the office of international education at California State University, Chico (CSUC) for three semesters, I helped many Chinese students on campus as translator, professional, and, sometimes, friend. I came to realize my experience was not unique among the many Chinese international students in the U.S. After almost two years of academic training, I have become a communication researcher and have decided to explore the intercultural and communicative implications of silence for both international and local university students. I hope my thesis presents the voice of Chinese students, despite their silence, as a tribute to both the field of communication studies as well as my graduate school in the United States.

A classroom with second language learners is unpredictable. It can be inspired, creative, and imaginative, but it can also be filled with embarrassment and uncertainty (Hsieh, 2014). Possibly the most important factor that affects the way an individual communicates in a new culture is their own cultural background (Byrnes, 2009). It is

commonplace for anyone who has ever been a second language speaker to experience a feeling of anxiety in the classroom. It is not abnormal for such students to choose to keep silent as a consequence.

The subject of how silence works in intercultural communication has received much attention in the last few decades (Damron & Morman, 2011; Nakane, 2006). People have been wondering about the cultural factors that lie behind silence or reticence to speak in intercultural communication. This thesis attempts to seek and understand the cultural-based perceptions of silence between Chinese and American college students.

Chinese students have a significant presence on campuses in the United States. According to *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange* (2015): There were 974,926 international students studying in America during the academic year 2014-2015. The number of Chinese students was 304,040, which comprised 31% of the total number. In comparison, India came in second with 13.6% international students. In the academic year 2014-2015, 88,874 more international students were studying in the U.S. than in 2013-2014, a 10% increase. There are now 40% more international students studying in the U.S. than a decade ago, and China was by far the leading source of these international students in the U.S. (Desilver, 2013), where China represented a whopping 60% of the growth in international students in the academic year 2013-2014 (Karin, 2014, November 30).

The economic contribution that Chinese international students make is obvious and remarkable. However, not many people recognize the psychological and emotional price that international students has to pay when adjusting to the American culture (Chen &

Yang, 2015; Young & Schartner, 2014), which involves “...many changes in identity, relationships, routines, and ideologies about self, work, and families” (Ye, 2006, p.3). With the growing number of international students from China, greater international diversity on U.S. campuses, and increasing contact between international cultures, a better understanding of Chinese English as a Second Language (ESL) learners is needed (Tatar, 2005).

The implicit cultural differences that are often studied are verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Meadors & Murray, 2014), as opposed to the present study’s investigation of silence as a medium for such differences. It is critical that scholars continue to seek a broader understanding of the building blocks that impact communication behavior of Chinese ESL students. Accordingly, this study will explore the role of silence, which is often misunderstood, between Chinese and American cultures and during intercultural communication between students on Chico State campus.

Intercultural communication is challenging. Uncertainty is guaranteed, and misunderstandings are a strong possibility. Such misunderstandings between cultures impede intercultural communication (Mafela, 2012), while students who enjoy new intercultural experiences thrive and add to successful communication (Shackleford, 2011, p.74). Just as Hofstede (1992) notes, “The cultural systems of nations and of their subdivisions are very complex and cannot be described in simple terms. It takes years to understand a single cultural system if one is not born to it. Even the cultural system in which we are born, cannot [be] said to be understood by us in a way which we can explain to others because we participate in it unconsciously” (p.90).

Culture forms over long periods of time (indeed, *generations* of people) and involves widely shared perceptions, beliefs, values, attitudes and practices which guide much of a people's behavior (Brislin, 1993). Within the same culture, people connect by using a common system of encoding and decoding messages. For the most part, cultures do this using unique verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Ulrey & Amason, 2001), and have their own ways of exchanging messages. When individuals of different cultures interact, problems or misunderstandings are inevitable. How can these problems be anticipated and what can be done to increase the understanding between the dominant culture host and the subculture guests?

The misunderstandings that occur in intercultural communications between Chinese and Americans university students because of silence will be studied. Discovering the contributing factors behind these misunderstandings will enhance our knowledge of this phenomenon. The study will also help us to respond appropriately to the silence that occurs in Chinese and American communication contexts and may ultimately aid the American teachers in their understanding of Chinese international students in classroom settings. Chinese students may be more accurately interpreted, and as a result, the foreign language anxiety and apprehension linked to negative consequences from the misunderstanding of silence can be lowered. It may help the improvement of our intercultural understanding and research in communication overall. "Understanding how individuals perceive and interpret interpersonal silence and how they feel when silence occurs will help bolster the understanding of its effects on human relationships" (Damron & Morman, 2011, p.187).

The remainder of this thesis will be divided into four chapters. Chapter II reviews relevant literature related to intercultural communication, nonverbal communication and Chinese students' experiences and related needs. Chapter III outlines the methodology employed in this thesis. Chapter IV presents findings, followed by Chapter V discussing the significance and implication of the study's findings for communication scholars, University core area faculty and staff, and American and Chinese university students. This chapter will conclude with the study's limitations and suggestion for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is divided into four sections, all the topics and concepts used are connected to intercultural interactions between university students. The first section presents an overview of intercultural communication. The next section reviews intercultural communication and silence, with emphasis on power distance, harmony, and American students' active participation. The third section explores nonverbal communication. A fourth section will examine Chinese students' experiences and related needs. Lastly, a research question for the present thesis is proposed on the basis of the aforementioned three sections.

Overview of Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication as a discipline for study began after the end of the Second World War in the late 1940's (Ayee, 2007). "Intercultural communication holds the possibility of deepening people's sense of compassion and connection to diverse others" (Walton, 2013, p.32). This area of interest highlights the fundamental differences that determine cultural diversity throughout the world (Piller, 2011). Intercultural communication, as defined by Ting-Toomey & Chung (2012) is "a symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities attempt to negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation within an embedded societal system" (p.16). These six concepts help frame the complexity of intercultural communication.

Specifically, according to Ting-Toomey & Chung, symbolic exchange includes both verbal and nonverbal exchange. Secondly, the process is the reciprocal nature of how two people communicate by encoding and decoding. In other words, one party sends the message by choosing correct words or gestures and the other party receives them by perceiving the message in one's own way. When the encoding of the sender and the decoding of the receiver matches, they will reach contentment. However, misunderstanding and second guesses are inevitable in intercultural communication, even when the sender and decoder share the same language. Thirdly, different cultural communities are typically groups who hold a shared set of traditions, beliefs, way of life, geographical location, and usually also an ethnicity or gender (Mishan, 2005). So, culture communities equal shared "frames of reference".

The fourth characteristic, negotiate shared meanings, refers to people using the creative give-and-take nature of the dynamic process of human communication to clarify the multiple layers of meanings. The fifth characteristic, an interactive situation refers to all of the communication process happening in a relational context (diverse relationships), a psychological context (moods, interpretations and expectations), and a physical context (features and surroundings). The last characteristic, embedded societal system is the multilayered larger societal environment. Ultimately, when representatives of different cultures employ verbal or nonverbal symbols as they try to share meaning, they do so in a dynamic process that is embedded in a broader system of interpretation.

A great deal has been written about the context of intercultural communication. Setting aside the textbook definition, what really is intercultural communication? Different people answer this question with different levels of complexity. However, one

definite quality is the assumption that people are culturally different from some or similar to others. “Culture is taken to be a national and/or ethnic category” (Paulston et al., 2012, p.4). No single definition or theory is broad enough to define intercultural communication, because it is just as hard to define culture.

There is big “C” Culture --the civilization and small “c” culture -- the customs, traditions, folkways and so on, it is our everyday culture (Moran, 2001). “Definitions [of culture] range from the all-encompassing (‘it is everything’) to the narrow (‘it is opera, art, and ballet’)” (Samovar and Porter, 2003, p.8). One way we interpret interactions with others is based on the use of verbal or nonverbal communication. However, a communicator’s purpose, identity, beliefs, values, and capabilities may be hidden by their culture (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). It must be kept in mind that *misunderstanding* and *miscommunication* are a big part of intercultural communication (Paulston et al., 2012). All this leads me to my focus: what role does silence play in intercultural communication?

Intercultural Communication and Silence

Studies have been done on silence throughout the years. For example, the role of silence in conversation (Cappella, 1980; McLaughlin & Cody, 1982; Zimmerman & West, 1975), silence as nonverbal communication (Bruneau, 2008; Kogure, 2007; Richmond, McCroskey, & Hickson, 2003), interpersonal silence (Damron & Morman, 2011; Knapp Hall, 2010), silence as a conflict-management strategy (Oduro-Frimpong, 2007), and the use of silence within the context of psychotherapy (Frankel, 2006; Gale, 2005; Ladany, 2004; Ronningstam, 2006). However, scarce attention has been paid to the

role of nonverbal communication from an intercultural perspective or to the strategies people employ when dealing with culturally different nonverbal cues (Vargas-Urpi, 2013).

Silence bears distinctive cultural characteristics in communication. In different cultures, silence conveys different meanings and attitudes. Silence, which one person intends as a sign of respect, may be interpreted as rudeness by others. This section reviews silence from *power distance* and *harmony* perspectives, which best explain the reasons why Chinese students often use silence, especially in an academic setting. American students' active participation is also reviewed for comparison.

Chinese culture, for example, often entails indirect and subtly *implicit* communication, where *no* oral participation may mean even more than the information conveyed by words (Vargas-Urpi, 2013). Gao (1998) pointed out that interrupting a speaker while he/she is talking, rarely occurs among Chinese, because silence is considered a virtue. Pauses and silence are signs of respect and active listening. In China, for example, often silence is interpreted as "listening" or "being obedient," which clearly separates the roles of speaker and listener. In the case of the listener, the three elements of silence, attention, and obedience are highly valued. This is especially true if the speaker is a person of a higher status since silence refers to a way of behaving. The weak-strong uncertainty avoidance value pattern (the degree of anxiety individuals feel in unknown or uncertain ambiguous situations) (Hofstede, 2001) may help to explain this. In a low uncertainty avoidance culture like China, people are more comfortable with uncertainty because they encounter it routinely.

In contrast, in a high uncertainty avoidance culture like America, people prefer predictable situations and have low tolerance for unknown and uncertain outcomes where silence might be unfavorably evaluated as rude or “not listening.” (Hofstede, 2001) It often serves as a negative role in conversations (Liu, 2002). Americans and Europeans “regard talk as desirable and use it for referential as well as social/affective purposes” (Liu, 2002, P.39). Americans value straightforward and *explicit* verbal communication (Daly, 1997; Yu & Chia-Fang, 2008).

Power Distance and Silence

Power distance is the extent to which people accept that power is distributed unequally. (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede & Bond, 1984; Hofstede et al., 2010). Power distance attribute has been identified as the key to understanding how people of different status interact. According to Tian (2008), in many developing countries social status may be *the* major consideration in communication because of this high power distance, which distinguishes communication patterns from those in developed countries. Hofstede’s power distance cultural dimension illuminates one of the differences between Chinese and American cultures and, accordingly, these differences are reflected in daily communication and education.

Power distance implies that people respond to authority differently in different cultures (Hofstede, 2001). America has a classic *low* power distance culture, an unequal distribution of power as relatively unacceptable where interpersonal equality is emphasized; children may contradict parents; younger people are considered smart; subordinates expect consultation; the communication patterns are informal and

personality equivalence is horizontal. In *lower* power distance countries like America, classrooms are notably more student-centered, and therefore teacher student interaction is more active, expected, and even sometimes graded.

A country's power distance explains fixed communication roles (Meeuwesen et al., 2009). China is a typical *large* power distance country (other examples include Malaysia, Slovakia, Philippines, Russia, Mexico and so on). *Large* power distance cultures appear to be related to cultural norms where "hierarchy means existential inequality" (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2001, p.98). In such cultures, the subordinates accept their supervisors as the authoritative figures whose privileges are a given. "Powerful people should try to look as powerful as possible," and "older people are respected and feared" (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2001, p.98). The higher the power distance in a culture, the greater the tendency of the members to accept their place in the society or organization. The less powerful members accept as given the authority of the more powerful (Jiang & Wei, 2013; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012)

In China, the inequality of power manifests itself in a teacher student hierarchy. While it may not technically be completely rote learning, traditional Chinese education mostly involves lectures of information where students are expected to listen closely, discern what to write in the way of notes, and take the whole lot home to be memorized for the exams (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). It is expected that Chinese instructors will wield their authority strictly and even, in some situations, physically punish their students, as a Chinese idiom goes, "*Raising a child with no education, the father is at fault; if the education is not strict enough, the teacher is at fault* (养不教父之过, 教不严师之惰)."'

Another Chinese expression alludes to the parent-like role of a teacher: “*He who mentors me for one day is respected as my father for life* (一日为师，终身为父).” Granting teachers such license in Chinese culture is not only proper but even extremely strict teachers are highly prized by the majority of parents because it is considered a sign of better care and guidance of students (Hu & Grove, 1999). Teachers go so far as to deliberately create distance to assert their authority and establish control of the class (Hwa-Froelich, 2000). Chinese teachers and students rarely interact either in or out of the classroom (Ho, 2001).

Harmony and Silence

A common observation about Chinese students in America is their silence (Liu, 2002; Tatar, 2005 c), in classrooms and social situations. They are often described as indirect or reserved (Gao, 1998), as listeners and instruction followers, or “receivers” instead of participants (Holmes, 2008, p.102). It is very likely for American instructors to struggle to engage most Chinese international students in communication. Why do many Chinese students appear reluctant to participate, specifically *orally* in classroom learning? Understanding the role of harmony in Chinese culture can answer this question.

Silence for Chinese people is a crucial part of their interpersonal communication and essential for maintaining the harmony of the social order, however (Holmes, 2008; Jones, 1999). Chinese students grow up communicating in asymmetrical and deferential patterns of communication. Gao explained, “The position one occupies in the hierarchical structure often determines how much one speaks. Thus, ‘voice’ is equated with seniority, authority, experience, knowledge, and expertise. As a result, listening becomes a

predominant mode of communication" (1998, p. 172-173). The use of silence in Chinese culture ultimately results in the avoidance of conflict and disagreement, both between parents and children and between teachers and students (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). Keeping silent during communication, by showing deference and restraint, is important in maintaining relational harmony in this culture. Therefore, when Chinese students attend classes at a university, this use of silence demonstrate an unspoken attempt to maintain classroom harmony.

American Students' Active Participation

In comparison to Chinese, silence is used less among American students when they are communicating (Yu & Chia-Fang, 2008). Their Eurocentric models of communication emphasize and rely upon open, obvious verbal and nonverbal behaviors to reach satisfactory and maximum communication effectiveness. Students often engage in learning through argumentation and critical discussion both with their teachers and classmates (Holmes, 2008).

Belanoff (2001), who pointed out that silence can have benefits, postulates that American culture fears silence. Westerners consider silence and ambiguity as negative. They feel compelled that "...words must be said, things must be described, things and categories must be created and analyzed, *the lips must keep dancing*" (Bruneau & Satoshi, 1988, p.21). Americans, according to Bruneau & Satoshi (1988), especially relish going on and on about even the slightest aspect of an issue, detailing definitions, descriptions, and special circumstances. More than other cultures, Americans seek security about things with objective speech which can appear to drag out the

conversation. This active communication style even emerges in the classroom as “student participation,” which is not only encouraged, in many cases it is even evaluated in U.S. curriculum (An, 2008). This idea is supported by studies of curricula which develop strategies to encourage classroom participation for more effective learning (Dallimore, Hertenstain & Platt, 2004).

With different outlooks on oral participation, it follows that Chinese and American students and teachers have difficulty understanding each other, even in the most mundane routines (Chen, 1993). “Students in the U.S. are more active in class presentations and discussions while Chinese students tend to remain silent during the activities… as compared to Chinese faculty, instructors in the U.S. play a less dominate role in teaching and learning” (Zhang, 2016, p.182). Thus, misunderstandings caused by silence in intercultural communication may be problematic. More serious than misunderstandings, Chinese students may be perceived as “underperforming” (and consequently graded lower) when they do not meet U.S. culture expectations for verbal and nonverbal communication.

Nonverbal Communication

In order to build a complete understanding of silence and intercultural communication, nonverbal communication is another essential component. Ting-Toomey & Chung (2012) explained “Nonverbal communication is defined as the message exchange process involving the use of nonlinguistic and paralinguistic cues that are expressed through multiple communication channels in a particular sociocultural setting” (p.133). They stressed that most researchers agree that nonverbal communication conveys

nearly 65% of the information transmitted in a face-to-face interaction. Nonverbal communication is also perceived as more authentic and believable than verbal communication when the two are inconsistent (Knapp & Hall, 2010; Gregersen, 2007). This may be because compared to verbal behavior, nonverbal communication is less intentional because of its “spontaneity and deception-free nature”, which comes from a subconscious level (Gregersen, 2007, p.210).

According to Vargas-Urpi (2013), traditionally, nonverbal communication has been classified into the following categories: proxemics, haptics, physical appearance, kinesics, and paralanguage. Silence, as one of the forms of non-verbal communication, falls into the paralanguage category. Paralanguage means non-word sound and characteristics of speech and voice qualities, that is to say, how something is said rather than what is said. For instance, tone, pitch, volume, pace, articulation, and silence of course (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). Moreover, a number of research studies have found that nonverbal communication and cultural norms are closely related (Phyllis, 2000).

Silence refers to “conscious and unconscious attempts to control the verbal expressions of one’s self and/or others” (Bruneau, 2008, p.78). For example, a person can deliberately silence oneself to avoid a predictable repercussion from speaking out; a person may unconsciously contemplate or day-dream in the middle of a conversation, which may unconsciously silence others.

Research indicates that silence is understood to be equally as important as the spoken word. “Silence concerns verbal thinking processes related to encoding and decoding

communication” (Bruneau, 2008, p.81). For instance, a frown of wonder, a smile of achievement, a shrug of frustration may be interpreted similarly or differently within different groups. “Silence and speech are both integral forms of human communication.” (Damron & Morman, 2011, p.185). Silence is not the absence of communication since speech and silence complement each other, and people often utilize verbal words to analyze silence.

Chinese Students’ Experiences and Related Needs

In the cultural adjustment process, silence is one of many challenges international students face compared with their American peers (Du & Wei, 2015). There are language barriers, cultural shock, a sense of disorientation in adjusting to a new environment, the pain of adapting to a new educational system, loss of social support, and a sense of *otherness* from the American students (Tas, 2013). American higher education instructors do show great interest in forming an understanding of how international students differ from American students and also in finding ways to help these students adjust to the new culture. Many researchers have studied adjustment issues for international students (Tseng & Newton, 2002).

Just like other international students, Chinese international students encounter both academic and cultural challenges in America (Zhang, 2016). Leaving their familiar home and support system in mainland China, Chinese students experience greater challenges adapting to the American educational system due to the drastic difference between their previous education in China and the new one in the U.S. (Yan & Berliner, 2009).

How one communicates in an intercultural situation, and how *well* they communicate, are culture specific traits (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). Recognizing how Chinese ESL students adjust to these cultural differences has been studied by previous researchers. Besides going to class and completing assignments, Chinese students must also negotiate the cultural communicative practices in their new American environment. Lacking a full understanding of the different hidden meanings of silence and its use in certain contexts might create difficulties and misunderstandings for Chinese students interacting with native speakers.

Similarly, misunderstandings between students and faculty from different cultures have occurred when the American teacher gets confused when Chinese students do not respond (Rong & McCornac, 2013). It is the Chinese students' habit of showing respect by being silent when a teacher is talking. Silence may also indicate that the student is too embarrassed to speak up because he/she fears this behavior might be interpreted as not listening or of being disinterested.

For example, cultural differences of silence may yield unfair judgments or mistakes about intentions or even competence to communicate appropriately (Tominaga, Gudykunst, & Ota, 2003). "Graded participation policies operate from an assumption that oral participation has a positive effect on student learning" (Meyer, 2007, p. 5). American scholar Jennifer Wood (1996) argues that class participation requirements do not really encourage participation, but they also do not effectively evaluate what a student actually knows. She contended that "we must get away from the false assumption that the amount one learns is directly connected to the amount one does (or does not) talk" (p. 111). Her

main point was that grades for student participation should not be based on what is *heard* in class.

Balas (2000) noted that assuming students lack learning because they are silent is improper. Silence is not indicative of a lack of knowledge. “Unfortunately, silence can be interpreted by instructors as a criticism of their teaching” (Meyer, 2007, p.8). It is important for counselors and international students’ advisors to understand international students’ use of silence from a more holistic point of view in academic settings if they want to help the students with their concerns. University core area faculty and staff can also learn from the findings of the current study when working with this population. As Chinese international students become more common at American universities, faculty and staff need to become more sensitive to their needs (Du & Wei, 2015).

Bruneau (2008) asserts that “Great philosophers and teachers throughout the ages, both East and West, have discussed silence” (p.77). Just as Damron & Morman (2011) stated, “Silence is a meaningful, yet clearly under-studied form of nonverbal communication” (p. 184). The intercultural meanings of silence vary because the value and application of silence as communication differs widely from one culture to another. Communication scholars, therefore, are obliged to make a greater effort to study “...cultural values and interpretations given to silences in communication interactions” (Bruneau & Satoshi, 1988, p.22). This study will specifically focus on understanding the role that silence plays when university students communicate interculturally. It also explores how American and Chinese university students negotiate *meaning* related to silence.

Silence, if understood appropriately, might be a bridge rather than a wall for intercultural communication. Accordingly, the following research questions were posed to guide the interview:

Research Question: What are the perceptions of silence by Chinese and American university students, and how is silence managed or negotiated?

RQ 1: When communicating with others, what phenomena are considered “silence”?

RQ 2: What are the immediate impressions of people who use an unusual or unexpected amount of silence in communication?

RQ 3: What are the misunderstandings related to “silence”?

RQ 4: How can students cope with misunderstandings caused by silence?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative design was employed with respondent interviews for data collection. “Qualitative researchers study *the performances and practices of human communication*” (Lindof & Taylor, 2011, p. 4). This “helps us answer the *how* and *what* questions that must be addressed in order to answer the *why* and *so what* questions” (Karpf et al, 2015, p.1890). It reveals each participant’s experiences in their own words. This study primarily focuses on the implications of silence during intercultural communication based on the experiences of American and Chinese university students. Thus, qualitative design, which best gathers the complex experience and perceptions of people (Gentles et al., 2015; Merriam, 2001), was exercised.

The goal of qualitative research is to achieve an in-depth understanding of how the world works in a specific context (Lindof & Taylor, 2011) in this case, the use of silence in a university setting. Additionally, qualitative methodology has been used to analyze how people describe the “dilemmas they encounter in maintaining and transforming them” (Lindof & Taylor, 2011, p. 21). In this study, how international Chinese students’ use of silence in America place them in a communication dilemma was explored and analyzed.

Herbert J. Gans (1962) described qualitative approaches as how the researcher gets close to reflecting reality. Qualitative research techniques are considered to be the most suitable in probing for a deeper understanding of any social aspect, when compared to

quantitative research (Threlfall, 1999). The analytical value and power makes qualitative methodology the best choice to explore how silence is perceived differently in American and Chinese culture, as well as reveal the assumptions, foundations and interpretations of those differences.

After receiving IRB approval, preparation for respondent interviews took place. “A qualitative interview is an excellent method if you want to gain insight into the intentions, feelings, purposes and comprehensions of the interviewee” (Cruickshank, 2012, p.42). Lindlof & Taylor (2011) explain that interviews provide insights into how those interviewed interpret both themselves and the phenomenon being studied, and allow participants to structure and interpret their own experiences. Additionally, interviews have been used to embody the viewpoints and experiences of less mainstream individuals (DeVault & Gross, 2007), which becomes relevant in the current study’s attention to the voice of Chinese international students who are from a subculture and whose experiences are generally ignored by the conventional culture in America.

Tellis (1997) proposes that the interview is one of the best means of gathering evidence because this method most accurately reflects what is in the participants’ minds. Interviews are “well suited to understand the social actor’s experience, knowledge, and worldviews”, also they enable “researchers to gather information about things or processes that cannot be observed effectively by other means” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 173-175). Respondent interviews, in particular, provide the interviewer the chance to uncover students’ true beliefs and communication styles about their use of silence more closely than other means of data collection.

The goal of respondent interviews is to evoke open-ended responses. Some of the general goals of this type of interview are to determine what influenced a person to form an opinion or to act in a certain way, or to classify complex attitude patterns (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Respondent interviews seek to find out how people express their views, how they judge their actions, how they make sense of their whole world, and so forth. “In short, we want them to disclose their subjective standpoints” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p.179) Interviewees are viewed upon as speaking subjects who use this conversation to manifest their identities as well as to understand their own opinions and place in the social hierarchy (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) By using the international students’ own responses and actual experience, the role of silence in intercultural context can be illuminated.

Settings and Participants

Based on this design, international students were interviewed to allow them to explain their communication experiences in the U.S. (inevitably, compared to in China) from their own perspectives. As the aim of this study was to explore the intercultural and communicative implications of silence, it was vital to identify a sample populations that had intercultural experience between American and international Chinese students, in addition to being an American or International Chinese student.

The interviewees were recruited using a snowball technique of recommended and self-identified university students who have had intercultural interactions with Chinese/American students. The main criterion, besides willingness to participate, was

the student had experience interacting with students from the other culture. In total, a sample of 20 participants, 5 males and 15 females, ten international Chinese students, and ten American students, were recruited. See Table 1 for specific details for each group.

Table 1

Demographics of Interviewees

	Chinese	Americans
Age	7 students - 25 years or younger, 3 students - 26 years or older	4 students - 25 years or younger, 6 students - 26 years or older
Gender	4 males, 6 females	1 male, 9 females
Grade	2 frosh, 1 sophomore, 3 seniors, 4 grad students	2 juniors, 4 seniors, 4 grad students
Years in USA	3 students - one year 4 students - two years 3 students - four years	NA

The researcher sent the participants emails to make appointments convenient to their schedule. All interviews took place in an interviewee-selected location on the campus of Chico State to create better rapport with the interviewer. The interviews lasted 15 to 35 minutes; the average was approximately 20 minutes.

The researcher herself is a Chinese native and bilingual, therefore, interviews with American participants were conducted in English, while interviews with the Chinese participants were conducted in Chinese. This allowed both groups to express their viewpoints thoroughly, and to explain how they truly felt in their native language. This also showed respect to the participants' choices, perspectives and standpoints.

Additionally, interviews in native languages help the researcher capture nuance, decrease any chance of message modification, prevent assumptions, and enhance attentiveness.

Data Collection

Interviews were scheduled with time for appropriate follow-up questions. Participants read and signed a consent form (See Appendix A), and were informed of their rights as subjects in the study. All the interviewees were encouraged to not only describe their experience, but also to reflect on it critically (Campbell, 2012; Jackson II et al., 2007). For example, they were asked to provide details and examples of an opinion for a deeper understanding. Or the researcher asked some probe questions to assist them to identify the true nature of an answer.

All interviews were audio taped. Audio recordings provides a digital transcript that can be listened to and transcribed later, which also allowed note taking by the interviewer. All of the interview discourse, therefore, could be captured and preserved with little effort by the researcher and the interviewer is freed to immerse more fully in the conversation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

The interviews were semi-structured but followed an interview guide with flexibility for appropriate probing and follow-up questions (see Appendix B). Ten open ended questions were asked, including seven with sub-questions. All questions were focused on interactions within a university setting. Open-ended questions allowed students to hone in on critical experiences, positive or negative, which they considered significant.

The first question asked the interviewee's perception of silence in general. For example, "How would you describe *silence*?" The second and third questions concentrated on the immediate impressions of people who use an unusual or unexpected amount of silence in communication, for example, "How do you feel when a person is silent?"

The next sequence of questions (4-7) inquired about misunderstandings related to silence. For example, "Have you had any experience of misunderstanding caused by silence?" The final sequence of questions (8-9) examines how students cope with misunderstandings caused by silence. For example, "Do you make adjustments when communicating with someone from another culture?"

The participants were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity to encourage honesty. All interviews were transcribed. The Chinese interviews were transcribed in Chinese first and analyzed. Then the relevant pieces were later translated into English.

Analysis of Data

The transcription of each interview ranged from 4 to 10 pages, altogether 112 double-spaced pages were transcribed. The analysis employed grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) which is a significant model for analyzing qualitative data because it creates an understandable "logic of discovery," along with a set of guidelines and terms, that organize the sometimes chaotic process of qualitative research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 250). Grounded theory helps the researcher "create theory" through the interaction of inductions and conclusions.

Firstly, different categories were open – coded, which were extracted from the interviews. Open coding helps to see how different categories are distinct from each other and how they are interconnected. A codebook was created to catalogue the codes utilized for each category.

In order to understand the actual communicative experiences of both American and Chinese students, the analysis of the data followed the criteria outlined by Owen (1994): recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness, to help shape the analysis process.

(a) recurrence- two or more descriptions with the same thread of meaning, even though different wording was used; (b) repetition- explicit use of the same wording two or more times; and (c) forcefulness- nonverbal behavior such as pitch or volume stressing the importance. (p.275)

The second step undertook axial coding, which means a new set of codes was developed with which the researcher was able to associate different categories in a meaningful and exhaustive way. This coding modified the emergent categories and yielded “deeper meanings of them” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 252). Dimensionalization is the last step that incorporates identifying the attributes or characteristics of categories and constructs (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Lastly, member checking was employed with the ten Chinese participants, during which time they were asked for their opinions about the categories, and whether they affirmed that the preliminary findings were accurate, credible, and valid (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Chinese interviewees were asked whether the English translation reflected their true experience without bias. All ten agreed with the accuracy of eventual transcriptions, translations, and categories. This process made sure the patterns and

themes from the preliminary findings were authentic, reliable, and trustworthy, as well as resonant and representative. Also, this provided a chance to correct any errors and add elaboration of critical analytic themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All of the collected data were then analyzed to clarify the participants' interpretation of the phenomenon of silence in a cross-cultural communication context.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Transcribed information collected from 20 participants was analyzed following the detailed procedures explained in Chapter 3, which was a three-step process. First, all transcriptions were attentively read twice by the researcher to gain an extensive and thorough understanding of all data. Next, the data were then color coded for recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Owen, 1994) and initial categories were pulled out. New categories were ultimately derived to identify groupings based on interrelations and connections. The categories were adjusted as needed to more closely define related perceptions and combinations of perceptions as the analysis process went on, until all the codes fit neatly into a designated category after exhaustive analysis in the third read through. This reading also included a category of forceful responses without a neat fit, which subsequently became a new category- unanticipated discoveries. Finally, all transcriptions were read closely one last time to make sure the categories were appropriate and responses filed in the best niche.

Table 2 reveals the final categories organized around the interview questions (left) and the determined codes/examples for Chinese and American students separately (right two columns). Any shared codes between both groups is indicated by italicized terms. Each category and the corresponding codes will be explained, followed by addressing the research question associated with those categories.

Table 2

Overview of Study Findings

Research Sub-questions & Categories	Chinese students	American students
What is <i>silence</i> ?		
• Verbal absence only		No noise; not talking; taking in through ears
• Both verbal and nonverbal absence	Neither speaking nor body gestures; not emotionally involved	
• Length of silence	30 seconds-1 hour	3 or a few seconds
What is your impression of silent people?		
• Positive	<i>Processing; listening; taking in, being respectful; sophisticated, modest; avoiding conflicts, good manners, calm ...</i>	<i>Processing; listening; calm...</i>
• Negative	<i>Anxious; shy...</i>	Awkward; <i>anxious; nervous; rude; confused; irritated; distracted; ambiguous; upset; embarrassed; shy...</i>
• Not positive or negative	Obedient; not showing off...	Cooling off; uncertain...
What are the misunderstandings related to <i>silence</i> ?		
• Willingness to participate/show interest	I wish I could have broken the silence; I am interested, but I'm not confident enough to interject	

• Ways to show respect	I would keep my thoughts to myself to show respect	Speaking up shows respect of yourself and others
• Offering incorrect answers	There is only one standard for correct answer	There is no such thing as a wrong answer

How can students cope with misunderstandings caused by silence?

• Cultural assimilation	Adopting new identity; make adjustments; cultural transformation
• Sharing “live” academic settings	<i>Videos of real classrooms; mock-up classroom</i>
• Cross-cultural activities	<i>Forums; Seminars; assemblies; workshops; intercultural training or communication trainings; language partner...</i>

Unanticipated discoveries

• American students are to be admired, or to be criticized?	American free style of oral participation is valuable: Admiration of Americans for speaking their minds, as a process of exploring ideas
	American free style of oral participation is frustrating: overwhelmingly confusing; careless chatter; off-topic; aggressive posturing
• Meaningful interaction creates understanding	Being able to see from others' perspective; sensitivity/listening/waiting more; awareness

What is Silence?

The data revealed that descriptions and opinions between American and Chinese students diverged about what phenomena are considered “silence” in general. They mentioned different communication styles and noted different lengths of silence. Marked differences in comfort with the length of time silence lasts were noted. Each of these dimensions will be described.

Absence of Verbal Communication.

As some American students indicated, “You are taking things in through your ears, I wouldn’t consider nonverbal as a lack of silence. If there’s no verbal, the person is silent.” Another typical definition of silence was “Basically stay quiet, no speaking, not necessarily taking in anything.” Others used the phrase “Silence is when no one is talking or making any sort of noise, the absence of verbal communication.” Six out of ten American students considered no verbal communication as silence, if there are no words coming out, then it is silence. The other four American students would take nonverbal communication, such as nodding of the head, making eye contact, clenching the jaw, as not being silent. Only one Chinese student considered the lack of verbal communication alone as silence.

Absence of both Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

International Chinese students definitely associated silence with both verbal and nonverbal communication. Nine out of ten Chinese international students articulated the following opinions: “They are not talking, emotionally not involved, they don’t have eye-contact, and they look down or away.” “Nothing verbal or not engaged in conversation

with facial expressions or hand movements and gestures.” These statements clarify that silence is not the absence of talking, but also includes emotional or physical signs of engagement.

Length of Silence

Eight out of ten international Chinese students said they were comfortable with and could bear a pause of a few minutes during a conversation. The other two said 30 seconds or so of silence was their limit. Some comments on this subject were “I can be in silence for a really long time, sometimes 30-40 mins, I would be completely okay with that.” “Silence lasts as long as you want it to.” “Silence means people are processing a thought, really thinking about something, considering what you are saying, I’m totally comfortable with that, even 20 minutes is fine by me.”

By contrast, American students were not as tolerant with the silent pauses in conversation. They were much less comfortable with the lengths or durations of silences than their Chinese counterparts. One American student said, “Silence can create a powerful impact, and more than 3-5 seconds can be too long.” Another said, “No more than a few seconds is comfortable.” “Silence becomes an awkward situation sometimes, it should be short, like 10 seconds.” “If it is longer than one minute it is really uncomfortable.” “It can depend on what’s happening, in conversation there are always pauses, but usually no more than a few seconds between two Americans.” The time limit for how long silence might last without creating awkward reactions, varies vastly between the American and Chinese students groups.

The findings demonstrated that the answer to the first sub-question “What is silence, in general?” is not *general* at all between American and Chinese participants’ perceptions. Whereas most Americans thought silence only involves a lack of verbal sound, Chinese considered nonverbal gestures as a type of communication, and therefore, not silence. Chinese students are much more comfortable than American students and are able to stay in silence for a longer time.

What Is Your Impression of Silent People?

The responses showed contrasting impressions between American and Chinese students about people who use silence. Students from both countries used positive or negative words describing people who used silence. However, most Americans used negative descriptions comments, and most Chinese used positive comments.

Positive

The analysis found that most of the Chinese students interpreted silence as carrying positive meaning. They commented: “They are good listeners.” “They withhold judgment.” “They are motivating or supporting others.” “They are showing obedience or respect.” “They have superiority or power.” “They are focusing on what the other person is saying.” “It is an indication of thought and therefore good – allowing a deeper conversation.” The popular belief among Chinese students is that silence can be a mode of mental performance, of deep and critical thinking, or simply the natural rhythm of a conversation, that is framed as positive. This can be understood from power distance perspective in the literature review (Hofstede, 1984; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

Negative

The majority of American students interpreted the silence as carrying negative meaning. They often equated silence with people being static and inactive participants in the conversation. Some comments regarding silence as negative in conversation were: “They are not paying attention.” “They are weird.” “They can’t hold the conversation.” “They are ignoring me,” or “They are not listening.” “There’s constant sound in American culture. Silence is not a part of it. So sitting in silence and not having access to sound would be terrible.” It appears silence was uncomfortable and looked at poorly by American students.

Not Positive or Negative

The following examples are quotes from both American and Chinese students which express different opinions regarding the use of silence in communication: “They don’t understand what was said.” “They are cooling off from what was said.” “They are uninterested in the conversation.” “If I don’t explicitly say something, then it doesn’t get communicated right, if I guess, I can guess wrong, so silence definitely does play a role in my understanding of what the other person thinks.” These impressions of people who use silence, are from both cultures and highlight a view of silence as part of a process that is not necessarily positive or negative. These impressions do not necessarily *judge* silence as good/bad, right/wrong.

In relation to the question: “What is your impression of silent people?” the findings clearly showed that the impressions held of others and their use of silence lead to

important judgments more often than not. People who are silent are viewed favorably, or at least well-accepted, by Chinese participants. But, for the most part, American students held negative impressions of silent people. Americans often thought silent people were confused, anxious, shy, distracted or even dumb. Additionally, the use of silence appears to make American students uncomfortable.

What Are the Misunderstandings Related to Silence?

The study found that nearly all Chinese students claimed they were unaware of any misunderstandings caused by silence from American students because: “I can’t think of anytime when American students *are* ever silent.” “American students will always ask for clarification to make sure things are okay.” Interviewees stated that Americans will ask questions such as: “Is anything wrong?” “Do you get what I am saying?” “Are you with me?” Chinese felt Americans being silent caused no misunderstandings for them (since Americans are so rarely silent). But they somehow sensed that American students might have misunderstood them, when they were silent. Americans noted misconstruing Chinese students’ intentions when they were silent. The following three categories emerged from analysis of the interviews:

Willingness to Participate>Show Interest

The majority of Chinese international students expressed that they may have caused misunderstandings when they were actually willing to participate or contribute. One

Chinese international student recalled his experience in class when the teacher asked questions:

I so often want to give feedback, but I don't know how to express myself with correct vocabulary or I'm not confident enough. The teacher and the other students might think I am not interested, but I *am* interested. They normally will change to the next topic before I can say anything.

The other Chinese students had similar experiences,

When we were doing pair work, she (the American classmate) talks so fast that I couldn't catch up with her, I have to keep silent because I don't really understand. She was frustrated. I wish I could have broken the silence, but I was still processing and trying to figure out what she said.

The collected data revealed that Chinese internationals were having a hard time getting their thoughts out loud when they were actually eager to be a part of classroom activities.

As another international Chinese student commented "I can't speak English well.

Sometimes I know the answer, but I can't say it out loud in English. My tongue cannot keep up with my brain, I need some time to think." Another international Chinese student put it this way: "Verbal speaking is kind of objective; subjectively, I might like to express an idea, but there are other barriers which prevent me from speaking." The reason that they may have been tong-tied, may also have to do with power distance as suggested in the literature review (Hofstede, 1984; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

The American students expressed that they did have some misunderstandings or a lack of clarity with Chinese students when they used silence for communicating. The following are examples of what Americans reported: "I was confused when a Chinese girl kept silent even when we asked her what she wanted to do... I wondered, do you

even care?" "When I was working with some Chinese students, there was this really awkward time when I was wondering if they understand me at all or if they could even communicate back to me." Americans seem to feel that silence is a vague and ambiguous phenomenon that needs to be clarified with words, it can be perceived as disengaged in American classroom discussions.

Ways to Show Respect

American and Chinese students have different manners for being respectful in the classroom, which might be another source of misunderstanding. A Chinese student captured what many other participants thought:

If there are disagreements between the teachers and me, I would keep my thoughts to myself to show respect. I would be silent because the teachers have more power over me. If people who have higher status are not going to see it the way I see it, I shouldn't make the situation worse. So maybe silence serves best for everyone.

Also, Chinese students would not challenge the professors with direct questions because they consider that would often put the instructor on a spot, which is considered disrespectful. "Silence is good for classroom communication because you don't want to overstep that boundary." Chinese believe silence helps to maintain the hierarchical order that they respect, which corresponds with both power distance (Hofstede, 1984; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012) and harmony (Holmes, 2008; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998) in the literature review.

Respect is painted with a different brush in the American classroom, however. One American student conveyed the belief that silence is not respect:

I would speak up if there is a disagreement or to clarify something ambiguous. If you are going to be silent about a subject that you disagree with, then you are going to have to live with it. It doesn't matter if that person is below you or is above you. It shows respect of yourself and others to speak up.

Exhibiting critical opinions or disagreement with the professor or a cohort is deemed an indicator of respect, engagement, showing interest, or enthusiasm in the learning process.

Furthermore, American professors tend to perceive this behavior as a sign of possessing academic competence and confidence instead of confrontation or disrespect.

Another American observed:

In school, when a professor is lecturing, he wants to hear some feedback, he doesn't want to hear silence, he wants to hear a response from you, to verify that you are getting their information. I don't think silence is considered a good thing in academic settings.

Apparently, American students try to fill up the void to prevent the potential unease or embarrassment which results from the use of silence, even if it is challenging. Certain behaviors which would be totally acceptable and not aggressive in an American view, may be interpreted as hostile and irritating in the Chinese classroom. Silence, rather than disagreement, confrontation, or criticism, is a better option for Chinese students to show respect in the classroom. This may conflict with American norms for showing respect in classrooms, and can lead to misunderstandings by American teachers and students.

Offering Incorrect/Wrong Answers

Most Chinese students expressed their concern about offering incorrect answers in the classroom, which may be a behavior transfer from their home country. A characteristic Chinese response was "If I'm not confident with my answer, I will not

speak up unless the lecturer nominates me to answer. If I'm on the edge of speaking, or not speaking, I will choose the latter." Another Chinese participant stated "Being a Chinese student, I have almost zero classroom participation experience. I keep silent, smile, and stay safe in American classes. Mostly, I observe what they (American students) do."

The standard for right answers in Chinese classroom is *fixed*, just as one Chinese female student stated "There is only one correct answer in the Chinese standard." Another Chinese student said forcefully, "I will be criticized if I'm wrong (in China), I'm not encouraged to speak if I'm not certain about my response." Another offered "We only speak when we make sure the answer is right and we won't say anything irrelevant. Speaking nonsense is bad." Their experience of speaking in class seems associated with anxiety, fear, embarrassment and shame. "It is scary to ask the instructor questions. I fear that he/she will criticize my weak grasp of the subject or theories. I'd rather be safe." said one. This is also observed by the American students:

My perception is that Chinese students are silent because they don't want to say the wrong thing. They are afraid to say the wrong thing. As if "Oh my God. If I say something am I going to say the wrong thing? Is it going to be appropriate? Am I going to pronounce the word correctly?"

One American participant perceived the positive side of Chinese students being silent while correct answers are formed, "Normally Chinese students are not always the first people to speak up, but they really have a lot of good things to say when they finally *do* speak up."

Regarding the standard for correct/wrong answers in American classroom, a typical Chinese perception was “I think American students just speak straight away whenever an idea comes up, and the teachers never seem to consider students’ opinions as wrong or silly”. Another Chinese student observed:

They (Americans) speak all the time, no matter *what* the question is. There is always someone who will give you a certain answer, no matter if it is correct or not. They don’t want silence to happen. I don’t think silence is acceptable in American classrooms. I’m amazed.

An American summarized “I just speak out, it’s just opinions, it’s no big deal, why should I keep it to myself?” Chinese respondents believe American students would not get embarrassed if they are “wrong”, because there apparently *are* no wrong answers in American academic settings. The American professors often facilitate discussions, they value participation and interaction much or more than correct answers.

Three categories emerged around the question “What are the misunderstandings related to silence?” When students use silence, the meaning which communicators assign can often lead to misunderstandings. First, Chinese students were usually willing to participate in classroom discussion. They were also somewhat hindered by their language proficiency, but more encumbered by cultural barriers. Second, Americans have different standards for showing respect in the classroom, not including the common Chinese practice of being silent. Third, fear of giving a wrong response was much more important motivation for Chinese students; whereas Americans answer without fear of impunity and readily offer answers, opinions, or whatever comes to mind. Silence is an absence of

response, but it does not necessarily mean the absence of meaning, hence it can be the cause of some misunderstandings in intercultural communication.

Ways to Cope with Misunderstandings

Caused by Silence

Three categories were revealed when talking about “How can students cope with misunderstandings caused by silence?” – cultural assimilation, sharing live academic settings, and cross-cultural activities. Each will be explained.

Cultural Assimilation

The majority of Chinese students acknowledge and even cherish the traditional Chinese way of silence. However, they are also open and willing to accept the distinct values of the host culture, even though it means compromising their own identity to some extent. “I may need to develop multiple identities in American culture, like making a code switch in different social settings. I will have to consider being outspoken as a means to acquire my new identity.” Another summed up “I’m well aware of the American teachers’ efforts to encourage me to more actively participate in class, but it is still hard for me to put my opinions forward in an aggressive or assertive manner. But I will definitely try.” This insight was offered by another: “Speaking up is necessary for my cultural transformation. A smart person ought to be able to recognize the new pattern expected in a different country and adapt to it.” They hope to better communicate and bond with their American peers, professors, and others by using more direct communication strategies and less silence. The Chinese students indicated they are

willing to learn and to expand communication skills and values. They believe they could do more to improve communication and strive to steer away from misunderstandings.

Observing “Live” Academic Settings

Both Chinese and American students raised the idea of watching actual video of each other’s real classrooms in their home country, so that they can understand the different educational systems as well as the culture behind them. While observing the “live” classroom, or even just a mock-up of the classroom, different values can be pointed out and discussed. Both sides will see the “bigger picture” and be more sensitive to the learners’ learning styles, needs, and norms and become acquainted with the educational and cultural background differences. Chinese students viewing students being led in discussion in the American classroom (hopefully before beginning American classes) will provide a clearer picture of the classroom expectations for participation and speaking. Alternatively, putting American students (and professors) in the shoes of the Chinese students could make them more forgiving and empathetic when the Chinese are silent. American students and teachers would benefit by viewing Chinese classrooms and learning about the values for respect, the focus on correct answers, and the restraint students practice. American instructors and advisors may learn the reasons behind the perceived silence of Chinese students, and learn how and in what ways they can encourage international students to adopt a more active mode, or learn how to adapt to Chinese speech patterns by allowing for more silence or time to answer.

Cross-Cultural Activities

Both American and Chinese students suggested activities that will help intercultural communication between the two parties. One student proposed:

Maybe put a forum together. Have a panel of Chinese students who have been here for maybe more than six months or a year explain how it is living here for an extended period of time. Teachers can go, too; their staff can go, too, and hear their perspective. I also think about what faculty can do. If a faculty member had a Chinese student in class, maybe they should be encouraged to say something as simple as "I'd like to learn more about you, please."

Another Chinese interviewee said, "We have a conversational program in ALCI. We learn the language, culture, and local community, while gaining different perspectives. We should foster the idea of getting to know a person from a different culture." Some Chinese students expressed their desire to be more fully a part of American culture. One American said:

Workshops, getting to know you type mingles - like when groups come together, having little clubs, having meetings, having international events, conversation clubs, activities like the ALCI is doing, is what is going to help them come out of their shell. Then talking to Americans, taking advantage of American interactions, making friends with Americans. When an American reaches out, say yes!

Others recommended that staff and faculty who have considerable interactions with Chinese international students attend a seminar or workshop on intercultural awareness and communication, maybe have a session to include the reasons for the use of silence of Chinese students, the ethos of education and engagement styles that are different from the local norms.

Both Chinese and American students proposed that Chinese students might adopt local attitudes for discussion in the classroom in order to be culturally assimilated. Observing each others' "live" classroom settings before Chinese students enter the American classroom might foster a better understanding of expectations for classroom demeanor. This could give them a head start on learning new cultural expectations. Cross-cultural activities to learn about cultural and societal norms were suggested by both groups, so that both American and Chinese students would have opportunities to learn more about and potentially adapt to one another.

Unanticipated Discoveries

There were two unanticipated emergent categories which merit mentioning. One unanticipated discovery was the divergent perspectives of American students' unconstrained interlocutions in class, within the Chinese samples. The other one was the similar appreciation of silence, over time, among American students who had ample interactions with Chinese students.

American Students Are to Be Admired, or to Be Criticized?

Interestingly, the active speaking role used by American students is viewed differently among Chinese students – within the same culture. About half of Chinese international students spoke highly of the American participation pattern. "It's almost the opposite of China in an American classroom, you are able to air your views freely, to assert without any restraint. The professors are never negative about any opinions, even though they might sound shallow. There is no right or wrong, there is only - speak your

mind, this is a process of exploring.” Chinese students articulated their admiration of the Americans unrestrained verbal expression.

Whereas, about half other Chinese students were confused or frustrated by the free style of the oral participation in American classrooms. “Some American discussion can be careless, trivial, or irrelevant.” Another complained, “They (Americans) don’t take turns, sometimes 3 or 4 students speak at the same time, I feel kind of lost.” This criticism was echoed by others: “A teacher will ask a question, but as I try to collect my ideas, there will always be an American student who takes over and interrupts my train of thought. I feel like I can hardly verbalize my point of view.” An American student sympathized, “Chinese students can become frustrated, because Americans are always talking. To them, it’s probably overwhelming and they might feel Americans are talking a lot, but not saying anything important.” Some of the Chinese participants perceive the off-topic and constant talking as beyond understanding, and counterproductive. They think this behavior may sabotage the pace of the class, distract other students, and interfere with the professor’s plan for unfolding the information.

Within the Chinese interviewees, about half admired the free flowing discussion of American classmates. Whereas the other half found the constant chatter useless, distracting, and counterproductive. What was unexpected was the differing interpretations within the Chinese student group, since in the other categories most perceptions were shared by most members.

Meaningful Interaction Creates Understanding

All the American interviewees had had some interactions with Chinese students, which was required to participate. The majority of them had *extensive* interactions with Chinese students, for example, working at the American Language and Culture Institution (ALCI), International Neighbors Club, or the Office of International Education. They all believed they gained more appreciation of Chinese students' communication styles over time.

One student said, "My experience through the office helped me see it from their perspective. More international exposure probably made me more sensitive and aware of different communication styles." Another offered:

When I first started working at ALCI, I was a little confused, "Why won't they directly speak to me?" I had an issue with that. "Why don't they speak to me? Don't they like me? What's going on?" It took some adjusting on my part to be able to understand where they were coming from. Not knowing the culture caused the misunderstanding. Once I began to learn the culture, I realized it's not proper to speak in their culture sometimes. It took knowledge to understand the culture.

The more exposed Americans had been to the Chinese culture beforehand, the more readily they accepted a different perspective than their own about such things as the use of silence by Chinese students. They even became aware and began to appreciate the positive aspects of silence.

The two unanticipated discoveries were both germane to *culture*. They suggested that there is potential to learn both within the culture and between the cultures. As people became more familiar with a new culture, they become more aware of the intercultural communication differences, whether they choose to adopt them or not.

The American author Ernest Hemingway said of his writing: “I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows.” It may be that this is the situation we have with silence. The reasons a person is silent run deep, but observers only see and react to the tip of the iceberg – the silence itself. The findings attempt to present the top one eighth; the deeper meaning of silence will be explored in the next chapter. The following discussion takes the categories identified by the analysis of interviews and probes deeper into the cultural meanings by forming broader themes. These themes connect the various findings across the original research questions, along with prior literature into deeper explanations for the role of silence when university students engage in intercultural communication interactions. The themes dig deeper, below the surface level perceptions, to build a more complex interpretation that can further inform our understanding of intercultural communication in university settings.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

At the conclusion of the literature review in Chapter II, a broad research question was posed “What are the perceptions of silence by Chinese and American university students, and how is silence managed or negotiated?” along with four sub-questions. The findings reported in chapter IV addressed the specific research sub-questions by providing details about the nature of silence, the impressions of people using silence, misunderstandings, and potential mechanisms for addressing misunderstandings related to silence. The analysis revealed meaningful differences between American and Chinese students that clarified how silence plays a role when students communicate across cultures within a learning environment. In this chapter those findings will be further discussed as they relate to three broader themes which address the implications of the findings. In addition, the practical implications to the study findings will be discussed. Finally, the chapter will address the study’s limitations, future research, and then conclude.

Thematic Iceberg: Layers and Meanings

Once the findings were analyzed and reflected upon with the literature review in mind, the researcher quickly learned that the findings were only the tip of the iceberg. The overall findings of the study show that there are meaningful differences in perceptions between Chinese and American university students in regards to silence. The collection of findings ultimately revealed broader themes around the role of silence as

much more than speaking or not speaking. More specifically, the broader themes show the complex and hidden communicative process and meanings engaged when silence is both managed and negotiated. The three main themes emerged and revealed the rest of the iceberg are as follows: English Proficiency, Differences in the Educational Systems, and Cultural Differences. Each of these themes reveal deeper contributing factors to the misunderstandings related to the use of silence by Chinese students. The seven-eighths that lies underneath the water hides what supports the mass above the water and what the currents act on. This discussion attempts to help us visualize the hidden aspects of silence.

Theme One - English Proficiency: Not the Whole Story

First, there is the challenge of English proficiency. The collected data showed Chinese students often have to pause to collect their thoughts because they are not proficient enough to speak more quickly in English. This pause or silence may be misunderstood as the Chinese student being unwilling to participate, or not wanting to make conversational contributions. The pause may also be perceived as lack of interest, or the student not having a voice for him or herself. For American students, these interpretations of silence contain judgments that appear to frame silence as a lack of interest or motivation, not just a language skill issue.

Silence, however, is not necessarily an indicator of a lack of knowledge or interest. It could be a simple limitation of language proficiency. It may be that such silent students do not understand the questions, need more time to process, or it may be they are not able to follow the train of thoughts of others. Sometimes the silent student may not be

confident, or they simply may not have the courage to speak up. Here are some comments from Chinese interviewees: “Sometimes in class, I am thinking of my answer, but before I can speak, the professor and the other American students are already on a different page before I have the courage to express my opinion.” An American student stated: “I sometimes had misunderstandings with Chinese students due to their trouble trying to pronounce the words, their accent, or the broken English.” This is in keeping with what Yuan (2011) pointed out: International Chinese students identified linguistic barriers as their biggest academic challenge.

While skill level may limit some Chinese students from speaking at the level or pace American students expect, the majority of Chinese students expressed their desire for participation and wanted their voice to be heard, but their intentions were hindered by their language proficiency. The category “*misunderstandings of willingness to participate or show interest*” identifies this dilemma. Chinese students may appear reluctant to speak up in class, but not because they do not want to, or because of lack of interest or opinion. A Chinese student recalled a misunderstanding between himself and his American friend:

When my American friend first met me, he was making an effort to get to know me while doing pair work in class. He kept bombarding me with different questions, and I felt I didn’t have time to think and reply before he jumped in with another question. I felt I couldn’t show him my real self. We are friends now, but he told me he thought I was not interested in the class and that I didn’t like him at first, because my answers were slow and short. Now that we are friends, he understands it was my lack of English proficiency that got in the way, and he now tries to remember to pause after each question. There is more reciprocity, and I can even manage to initiate some questions for him. I feel more authentic and engaged in our friendship.

Some international Chinese students have this same sense of isolation, of feeling like an “outsider,” of not being able to express their “authentic” self, with their America

classmates. This feeling is exacerbated by the unfamiliar American educational system and other cultural differences, which will be addressed later in this section.

Surprisingly, while English proficiency plays an important role in communication, it is not the predominate barrier to understanding the silence of Chinese international students. In other words, it is not the whole story. According to one Chinese interviewee, “In some classrooms, there are other international students, like Arabic students, who speak a lot more than Chinese students! It surprised me a lot.” Another Chinese student offered, “I feel like Chinese and Japanese students are silent most of the time, but Indian students took the opportunity to talk even though they don’t know what they are talking about. I mean it’s not bad… I wish I could break the silence with *something*.” Both American and Chinese students noticed that students from other countries (For example, Indian, Arabic and European students), who are also international students with a similar level of English proficiency, are much more verbally active in class. So, English proficiency does not constrain all international students and is not necessarily an indication of low interest or desire to participate.

It has been observed that communication in academic settings entails not merely linguistic proficiency (Jones, 1999). There are other barriers, or additional layers of meaning beyond language proficiency that are part of the meaning, management, and negotiation process. These layers are explored in the next two themes. The next theme shows that the expectations of the students and the role of silence in the differing educational systems are in stark contrast to each other.

Theme Two - Educational Systems: Product versus Process

Another part of the quiet, mysterious iceberg hidden below the waterline is the influence of the educational system. The purpose of all educational systems is to promote the cognitive, academic, personal and social development of students. The structure of these systems varies based on goals, resources available and societal values. In this theme, the paradigm of the classroom environment, the values emphasized in the instructional setting, and the contributions of students in the classroom in China and the United States will be presented and discussed.

Teacher or student centered?

In this first educational system sub-theme, the focus of classroom interaction is explained. The ideologies and theories of Chinese classrooms has been teacher-centered, content based, and examination-oriented (Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Wang & Kreysa 2006). Teachers give lectures and the students take notes. This is in keeping with the power distance attribute noted in the literature review (Hofstede, 2009), which clearly distinguishes the communication patterns and explains fixed communication functions. In Chinese classrooms, teachers occupy an entrenched position of absolute authority, and students are less powerful. Teachers are respected for this authority and are regarded as “parental figures” (Braddock et al., 1995, p. 21). Students show their respect for this hierarchy by restricting their contributions and remaining respectfully silent during classroom interactions in deference to the teachers who play the superior role. “Ever since I was a child, my understanding was that teachers did not like talkative kids. Such

talkers must suffer from attention deficit or hyperactivity disorders; they are mischievous and annoying," explained one Chinese student.

In China, students speak only when required, or spoken to by the instructor to keep the social order. As one interviewee put it, "You have to raise your hand if you have a question, and you are only able to ask if the instructor lets you. Your question might make the instructor look like he hadn't taught well, so usually you have to ask after class." Said another, "Professors designate who will answer the question, it's random. You do not have permission to talk unless the teacher tells you to." Yet another Chinese student suggested:

If I have conflicting views from the professor's, I will keep them to myself. My silence does not mean I agree, but I would like to keep my own opinion by being silent because I cannot challenge a teacher who is obviously of a higher status.

When teachers dominate the classroom sphere in this way, it leaves students little inclination or opportunity to speak in class or discussions with peers. Anyone who does talk voluntarily violates the turn-taking rule, even if his or her answer is correct, and threatens the power distance.

Three international students mentioned that class size may also contribute to interaction patterns. The average classroom size in China is 50-60 students, versus 20-30 high school/undergraduate students or 12 graduate students in America. One of these students proposed:

Let's take the scenario that a professor asks 10 questions in one class period. What are the chances that the students have the opportunity to answer? A Chinese student may get 1 opportunity a week, but an American student may take 1 or more per class.

In China, instructors have the students ask questions after class because of the large class size, in order to keep the entire class period flowing smoothly. The level of control and formality is heightened as the size of the class increases. Additionally, even when a Chinese student has an opportunity to answer a question, the instructor determines who will get that opportunity. But more importantly, the questions are asked *after* class as a sign of respect and to not question the authority of the teacher in front of others. In this way, the teacher-centered structure is maintained.

There are large classes at some American universities. CSUC has fewer large classes than what would be found at on UC campus. However, even when enrollment is large, student participation, input and interaction are still expected and facilitated via in-class exercises or online forums. This clearly shows, in comparison, American classroom management is more student-centered.

Over two decades ago, Barr & Tagg (1995) claimed that the higher education in America had shifted from a teacher – centered to a learner – centered paradigm. The student-centered classroom has been valued in U.S. colleges and universities ever since, which is believed to contribute to the success of faculty and promotes more effective learning (Webber, 2012). The low power distance in American higher education tends to treat teachers and students as equals (Bishop, et al., 2014). One Chinese participant observed, “Some of the American teachers even told us to call them by their first names - I will never, ever do that; I would not dare; it’s too disrespectful.” An American student said, “In class, the interactional routines are informal. Turn-taking patterns are free, and there’s not much difference from a discussion among friends.” Classes have evolved to

be much more informal in North American higher education (Jones, 1999). Students are expected to and will actively participate in classroom discussions, and these informal expectations lead to assumptions about the role of student and teacher, as well as how power is more shared than limited.

Chinese interviewees were surprised to notice the way American students even challenged the professors. This definitely goes against the Chinese tradition of obedience and harmony, which resonates with the literature review (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Holmes, 2008). One Chinese student was half-teasing when he stated, “I would suffer physical punishment by Chinese professors if I ever dared to challenge the authorities as American students do.” On the contrary, an American student said, “We American students, for sure, will not miss any opportunity to challenge the authorities.” While student verbal participation is highly constrained and regulated by the Chinese teacher, American teachers let students control their verbal participation. “Professors invite challenges and interruptions. Free participation is preferred through much of a class.” The freedom of speech is not only embraced in the classroom but honored in American society as a whole. As reported by Bruneau (2008), “Americans take pride in their assumptions about the importance of freedom of speech.” (p.83). The sub-theme of *teacher or student centered* has clarified how classroom styles and expectations are strong influences on how students communicate. In the next sub-theme, cultural values held by Chinese students are at the heart of their communicative choices.

Silence versus verbal participation.

In this second educational system sub-theme, the culture message of participation in the classroom is explored. Silence is often given weight in Chinese classrooms. Gao (1998) pointed out that, “Students are expected to concentrate on listening to the teacher for the majority of the time. Most Chinese schools emphasize listening skills, memorizing skills, writing skills, and reading skills... but rarely *speaking* skills” (p. 173). As one Chinese interviewee remarked, “It’s polite to listen silently when the teacher is lecturing.” Another Chinese student expressed a similar opinion: “A person who doesn’t talk is considered to be observant. He is paying attention and being respectful.” For Chinese students, silence counts as a means of participation.

Additionally, speaking and participation are not included in the curriculum in any educational level in China. Lecturers expect and only allow minimal discussion in class since most classes consist of rote learning. There is not much *to* discuss (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Conformity is appreciated more than oral expression. “I almost never had any practice in speech or speaking in any way, consequently I am not confident speaking in class.” Another Chinese student said, “My writing, listening, reading and grammar are fine, but my speaking ability is horrible since I was never asked to speak, nor did any of my grades reflect my ability to speak or participate.” Knowledge is *imparted* by Chinese instructors. Classroom participation, especially orally, is, for the most part, inhibited. Students’ grades are mostly evaluated by their written work. Verbal performance is not required as a proof of learning or understanding. Even if proficient in English language,

chances are Chinese students intentionally practice silence for more value-centric reasons, reinforced throughout their entire educational experience.

The findings category “*both verbal and nonverbal absence is silence*” indicates that the Chinese international students in the sample, predominantly believed that nonverbal communication, such as nodding, smiling, frowning, and taking notes are forms of participation and evidence of learning and communication. Although not speaking, students are still mentally active in class. They are expected to attentively listen to the instructor. Showing responses through nonverbal communication are not only normal or appropriate, but also encouraged. There are alternative ways of classroom participation other than speaking. However, the “silent participation” of the international Chinese students deviated from the American norm of classroom discussion in the form of speaking up; this is evident by the finding that the majority of American students deem no verbal communication as silence.

The implication of this silent participation versus verbal participation decision grows deeper when we add that American classrooms often include class discussion and other verbal participation as part of the grading assessment. Participation is not only valued and expected, but even graded sometimes. Verbal activity is considered a positive classroom practice, a sign of engagement, willingness to learn, and understanding, and may also be an assignment depending on the context. However, Jaworski, & Sachdev (2004) revealed that silence may be considered as ineffective and unsuccessful learning. Consequently, American students are encouraged and motivated to speak up in class. Plus, the value or

weight given to grades may also be one of the driving forces of their unrestrained voluntary utterances.

The difference in values and communicating respect are a constant source of influence between Chinese students, the American students, and their instructors. This was demonstrated by the category “*misunderstandings in ways to show respect*” in the findings. Coming from teacher-centered classrooms where silence is valued, Chinese students show respect by listening and taking notes silently except for when directly called upon. Such silence is far from demonstrating engagement in student-centered American classrooms, where discussions and freedom of speech are expectations. In sum, Chinese students consider silence as a means of participation while American students value verbal participation.

While the verbal and/or nonverbal communication related to silence or participation of a student can play a role in misunderstandings, so, too, can the content of communication, as we will examine in the next point.

Answers or right answers?

In this third and final educational sub-theme, the valued content of communicative messages is clarified. Chinese schooling values the correctness of the *end product* more than parts of the learning process itself, such as verbal performance (Haugh, & Hinze, 2003). Chinese students will be judged when they speak in class by both their teachers and their peers. Many Chinese students experience anxiety about speaking in class and do so only with good preparation or adequate background knowledge (Nakane, 2006).

Wrong answers are considered disruptive to the flow of classroom interaction and bring shame to the speaker. One Chinese student recalled:

I can almost imagine the negative facial expression of the teacher as it would have been shameful if my opinion were wrong or weak, *and everybody else in the class would have witnessed it.* I'd rather inhibit myself from speaking if I am not 90% positive that my answer is correct.

Classroom participation, such as raising questions and comments, can be a risky act in Chinese classrooms. This is in stark contrast with the American expectation for oral participation.

American students are not afraid to be wrong, or there is typically “no such thing as a wrong answer” in classroom discussions. This comparison can be seen in the category “*misunderstandings of offering incorrect answers*” from the findings. American students believe learning is achieved through open discussion and exploration of ideas. Therefore, the process of speaking is emphasized. A response from an American student was, “We should say anything on our mind and ask about anything. There is no such thing as a stupid question.” In American classes, students are judged for *not* speaking.

Alternatively, being *correct* is the priority and the teacher is the ultimate power-holder in Chinese academic settings. Typical feelings of Chinese students reflected their inability to adjust to the American expectation- “I still wouldn’t just blurt out answers, although I know I won’t be judged whatsoever in an American classroom. It’s just a habit. I always think my participation should be correct and meaningful.” The tension here is between value for the product of communication, which should be correct content or answers, and the value for the process of constructing content or answers that may

eventually be correct. Apparently, offering “incorrect” answers is perceived so negatively by Chinese students, that the choice of silence in the American classroom, while knowingly perceived as non-participative, is still better than being wrong.

Overall, this broad theme has explored and explained the differences in the educational systems which have contributed to Chinese students’ use of silence in the classroom. It is not that one educational system is superior to the other, it is the communication patterns, values, and roles in the classroom that are solidifying their own culture. What is expected in the Chinese classroom, for example, silence, is completely opposite from the expectations in American academic settings. More importantly, we see the tensions between different educational values and practices that are complex and full of nuanced meanings. What dictates the educational system? If we go deeper into the bottom layer of the iceberg, the embedded cultural differences appear to be of great significance.

Theme Three - Culture: The Deepest Layer

Last, but not least, the cultural theme supports our iceberg of silence in providing the foundation for understanding silence. As Damron & Morman (2011) asserted, silence is multifaceted. In different cultures, silence conveys different meanings and attitudes. In Chinese culture, silence is to be revered and appreciated. By keeping silent, people honor the speaker and show interest and respect, in a classroom or anywhere else.

Chinese students grow up that way. A Chinese student noted, “We appreciate silence because we think it is a natural part of being around other people. Silence is one of my

core values - the ability to listen to others, support them, and to withhold judgment.” Chinese people believe that serious and significant decision-making necessitates silence, which means people who are speaking need that quiet and uninterrupted ambiance to contemplate. Additional conversation and verbal interjection are considered disrespectful. This theme goes beyond the differences in education systems and shows how the role of silence and its many meanings is embedded in our deepest value systems from the moment we can first communicate. This final theme has three sub-themes, *The “Stuck Out Bird”*, *Saving Face*, and *Within One Culture and Between Two Cultures*. Each will be presented below, followed by a summary of the three broad themes overall.

The “stuck out bird”.

A common explanation for the differences in the perception of the value of silence, heard during both the Chinese and American interviews, was: “I grew up that way.” Students could not easily explain why silence was perceived differently. “It has a great deal to do with our upbringing. Americans grow up around a lot of noise,” speculated one American. In juxtaposition, a Chinese student observed, “It’s natural for me to be silent, I was raised that way. If I speak up, I will be knocked down. Being silent is a reflex in the classroom, just as you drink water when you are thirsty.” These students are saying being silent or speaking up is not necessarily an intentional choice, it is more of a habitual unconscious reaction from the way they were brought up.

When asked why he kept silent in class, a Chinese student emphasized, “I was raised to be silent in the classroom to be considered a good child.” In contrast, an American said:

Silence is seen as a negative thing in American culture. Just because we are not a silent society, we are very outspoken, we value freedom of speech. I think it's within our culture to not be silent. Silence is not at all a virtue in American culture. It's kind of instilled in us to speak up.

Another American interviewee said, "My parents told me that I need to be able to express myself in whatever way I can." As far back as she could remember, her parents had emphasized the value of being outspoken. Another American said, "You need to speak for yourself. When something is wrong, you need to say something." These students are indicating that the decision to remain silent or to speak whenever one wants are both culturally favored in their own cultural background.

Chinese students brought up a few sayings passed along generation by generation. Six of the Chinese students mentioned this idiom: "The hunter shoots the first bird which sticks out its head from the bush (枪打出头鸟)" which has to do with the anxiety about showing off or standing out in a group. There is another similar idiom which reads, "The nail that sticks up most gets hammered down first." Chinese parents and teachers have given them this advice ever since they were little. They say "do not stand out". Prominent individuals normally take the brunt of an attack. Parents in China often tell their child: "You should get along with others, don't try to be unique, keep different opinions to yourself." One interviewee explained:

My teacher told my mom he was unhappy because I spoke up in class and always had different views when I was in primary school; my mom was upset with me and told me to remember, "The hunter shoots the first bird which sticks out its head from the bush." I then realized I was not appreciated and my behavior both disturbed my teacher and humiliated my mom. I've been quiet in class ever since.

Taking the lead or being remarkable is not encouraged in Chinese culture. People are supposed to get along with others in a group setting, follow the general trend, and do as the others do. Teamwork is valued more than personal achievement. Silence is a common element in Chinese classrooms; it's natural and normal, and it ultimately contributes to the value of collectivism (Bente et al., 2012; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2001).

On the contrary, American culture applauds the “stuck out bird.” People yearn to be and are praised for being one of a kind and exceptional. “Be yourself” is common advice, along with “Don’t let others keep you from your dream.” Entrepreneurs, visionaries, and inventors are glorified more than common workers. “It has a lot to do with how media portrays heroes,” said one American. “From childhood storybooks to modern movies, successful people are shown to be innovators or rebel fighters against the accepted ideas.” Life is richer and fuller being different, which resonates with the value of individualism (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2001; Lalwani & Shavitt, 2009).

Both American and Chinese interviewees cited their upbringing as an important influence on their communication choices, practices and goals. The manner in which they grow up may reinforce how they behave in the classroom, but it is not where they originally learned about the ways of silence. The cultural upbringing: anecdotes, reprimands, corrections, etc. from both parents and teachers over the years train us to behave a certain way – high acceptance of silence versus compulsory discussion. This sub-theme demonstrates that the “stuck out bird” can be the desired role or the role to be avoided at all costs, depending upon how you were raised. The next sub-theme built on this by showing the connection to *saving face*.

Saving face.

The figurative meaning of “face” refers to perpetuating a positive image in public (Liu, 2002; Wang & Spencer-Oatey, 2015). People lose face when their performance falls below expectations, and Chinese are very sensitive to the judgment of others. They would rather keep silent than run the risk of losing face or appearing foolish. One Chinese student said, “I prefer to remain silent if my questions or comments are not significant, so that I will be able to save face.” The Chinese interviewees felt that speaking with limited knowledge may subject one to embarrassment and therefore stain their positive image. Relevant and meaningful contributions are major concerns to Chinese (Tatar, 2005). A Chinese participant intoned, “I was always told that ‘Silence is better than speech.’ It is not appropriate to just say something for the sake of saying it. It needs to be worth it when you actually speak in class – something valuable or meaningful.” Beyond respect for the teacher, or the group, there is concern for the self-image that drives the practice of silence.

“Tongue-tied knowledge is superior to ignorant loquacity (言多必失)” is another traditional saying which reflects a common belief with which Chinese students grow up. Don’t make a fool of yourself in front of people by saying something stupid which is equivalent to Abraham Lincoln’s admonition: “*Better to remain silent* and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt.” In more detail, one Chinese interviewee explained, “There are many people in the same classroom. If my response is wrong, I will blush with shame at my own faults. How will other people judge me? I’m losing face. It’s extremely embarrassing. It’s good to have strategic time in silence to think and

contemplate.” From Chinese culture norms, the fear of losing face is too great for them to adopt active speech roles in class. This would be very difficult to change; the expectation that a student could change their participation style in one semester is probably not realistic. Apparently the “stuck out bird” would endanger his or her face with unwanted attention.

Remaining silent can be a way of saving face, while avoiding disagreement, conflict or criticism. “Chinese cherish and nurture the belief that conflict should be approached with self-control and self-restraint. This belief is deeply ingrained in the Chinese psyche” (Gao, 1998, p. 180). Saving face pulls together the influence of power distance (Hofstede, 1984; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012), harmony and obedience (Holmes, 2008; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998), and low uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2001) by highlighting the role of self-image.

In American culture, however, silence symbolizes disengagement and disinterest instead of saving face. They rely heavily on open and obvious communication with each other to obtain effective understanding. The high uncertainty avoidance value pattern proposed by Hofstede (2001) in the literature review helps to explain such need for constant explicit expression. Americans may be frustrated by silence and do not readily use this in their communications. Here an American student reflects: “We think silence is bad for the entire flow of communication. It can be really awkward. People try to fill the silences, even if they don’t have anything to say. We might say, ‘Sooo...’ or ‘Ummm...’ just to keep the conversation going.” Apparently, American students try to use words to fill up the void to prevent the potential unease or embarrassment, which results from the

use of silence. If American students wished to save face / fit in, it may be that speaking out is a way to do so. If they are to be the “stuck out bird,” they must not just stretch their neck out, but speaking is also warranted to garner attention and make others feel comfortable.

This sub-theme has shown that the decision to be silent or to speak up in the classroom apparently is strongly determined by cultural background, which involves some unspoken norms that govern differential patterns of participation. Chinese students are predisposed towards silence. The use of silence may be a conscious choice and an alternative way of participation for international Chinese students to internalize information in a less anxious environment. It would be helpful to international students if we could broaden our perceptions of silence and the function of talking in ways that could not only respect differences but also improve learning.

Within one culture and between two cultures.

There were two unanticipated discoveries in the research, both of which are associated with culture and will be explained in this sub-theme. The first unexpected discovery was that among Chinese international student, the attitude toward the American students’ unrestrained verbal expression took on two dimensions.

About half Chinese students admire the freedom of speech Americans have in the classroom. A typical description was “I have so much admiration when the Americans express exactly as their minds dictate with zest and gusto.” While the other half feel that so much unregulated verbalization can interfere with the flow of the instruction and

become a distraction: “They (some talkative American students) dominate the class, maybe unintentionally. But it makes it even harder for me to get a turn even if I am willing to speak up.” was a characteristic remark. Another Chinese student said, “They are aggressive, not deliberately, but they just keep talking all the time even when it’s not at all to the point, because they know they will score something as long as the lips are moving.” These are two very different interpretations.

Implications of this discovery are also twofold. First, this finding alerts us that we should not make assumptions nor generalize about a culture, because even people who share the same culture may differ in their perceptions. However, there are times when reasonable generalizations may be helpful when meeting people from another culture initially, but not all students from a particular culture, American, Chinese, or otherwise, are prone to react the same way.

The second implication is in regards to the relatively negative perceptions about the counterproductive “free talking” in U.S. classrooms. American educators, especially at higher levels, should consider this critically. At first blush, these comments may seem based only on differing educational system and cultural differences. However, maybe Chinese students have viewed the American classroom manner and participation from a more objective and vigilant perspective. American students may in fact be haphazardly rambling about a topic in class - which is potentially less useful or beneficial in terms of pushing the academic goal forward. When there is no fine line between when to speak up and when to be silent and listen, perhaps room should be made for more areas of gray that encourage listening, thinking, and informed comments.

The second unanticipated discovery indicates that American participants believed that more cross-cultural exposure helped them to better understand Chinese students' use of silence. The extent of appreciation of another culture appears to increase in relation to the frequency of interactions with that culture. One American student opined, "I think Chinese students made us all learn to cherish the value of silence over time. We are so quick to use as many words as possible and we forget how powerful each word is, and how important they are, so it makes us more aware of what we were saying." American students were able to analyze and even adapt to the Chinese communication patterns with more consciousness of intercultural variations.

This sub-theme has identified potential to learn within one culture and the potential to learn between two cultures. The contrasting comments within the Chinese sample group demonstrates that individuals' own identity is the ultimate element that decides their preference and patterns, how they deal with unfamiliar situations, how likely they are to adjust to an entirely unaccustomed environment, and how they develop new identities (Toomey & Ting-Toomey, 2013). The extensive experience from American students indicates that it is necessary to acknowledge another culture, and adaptation is needed by both parties. Only in this way, can we adopt an ethnographic perspective to bridge the gap between different cultures and be more willing to communicate with empathy and understanding.

The overall theme of culture, the deepest of levels of our iceberg, has shown how culture may emerge as the most significant influence towards silence. One's cultural upbringing greatly shapes ones response in communication. From parents to teachers, the

Chinese student's self image revolves around respect, modesty, and harmony. Avoiding negative judgment by remaining silent is a strong cultural norm. American cultural upbringing is quite different. Positive self-image includes being an individual, unique and speaking your own mind. Saving face for the American student may include filling in uncomfortable silence. But it is important to note that even within one culture, there are differences in views about the use of silence and speaking up. It is important for both cultures to spend time interacting and empathizing with each other in order to bridge the silence gap, while transcending their personal culture identity and possibly adding new elements to that identity.

In summary, the three themes that emerged under the iceberg of silence were English Proficiency, Educational System, and Culture. At the first look at the iceberg of silence, one vaguely sees English Proficiency in the shadows below. It would be easy to identify that as the sole cause of silence. But as we dig deeper into the iceberg, we find the more significant layer of the Educational System. The differences are vast between the American and Chinese, and contribute greatly to different engagement styles, even more so than the English Proficiency. The deepest layer of the iceberg of silence is Culture, and this is the most fundamental. Culture dictates the core values of the two Educational Systems as well as communication patterns and norms. It is with this understanding of these hidden layers that we can visualize the entire iceberg of Silence with a more insightful view, above and below.

Practical Implications

Many Chinese students are struggling with language proficiency, disparities in educational systems, and cultural differences, which manifests itself by their silence in the classroom. Their performance may be appropriate and adequate according to their own culture, but is evaluated (mostly) negatively in America. However, both American and Chinese students recalled or proposed various ways and practical ideas to help with the misunderstandings or miscommunications between Chinese and American university students. The goal would be to build up their cross-cultural interactional skills, and to make an effort to learn each other's social and cultural norms and find common ground, so that they will become more equal partners. The prior themes have demonstrated there is a lot to learn about the role of silence that could enhance intercultural interactions in university settings. The good news is that the participants indicated that such learning is possible.

The majority of American students admit they know very little about Chinese culture, or non-western culture in general. Intercultural misunderstandings can discourage international students, and potentially generate discrimination and communication breakdown (Kaur, 2011). Just as an American participant pointed out:

The way they (international students) enter into a situation can totally dictate the outcome, so their attitude going into it, their emotions, their perspectives on how they are going to enter a conversation - are they open? Curious? Ready to learn versus being very closed off? Isolated? Feeling very angry in an environment that is very hard for them? Because eventually they're going to hit something that is hard, a cultural shock, whatever it is, and the way they come out of it, what they learn from it, is totally going to depend on how they enter it.

It is essential to find ways to learn about international students and raise the overall cross-cultural awareness, to provide some type of support program, and to academically prepare both students and professors. The same openness this student speaks of would also apply to American students.

CSUC provides a vision of language support – and has the only English as a Second Language (ESL) resource center in the CSU system. This center provides tutoring for non-native English speakers; for instance, grammar assistance, speech preparation, reading tutoring, language partners and preparation for language exams. This has been beneficial for second language learners. Even so, it is still very challenging for the international Chinese students here in Chico to adapt to the U.S. academic environment. We can only imagine how hard it must be for the students in other universities without this language proficiency support. Brilliant Chinese students may be judged harshly for following the same “silent path” that earned them the scholarship to America. International students need not only equality, but also equity.

The findings showed interviewees proposed three categories – cultural assimilation, sharing live academic settings, and cross-cultural activities, to better deal with misunderstandings caused by silence. Students from both countries offered similar remedies in the way of suggested observations of each other’s cultures, language support, and simple cross-cultural activities. Whatever proposals are made will come to nothing unless universities are persuaded of the necessity and significance of cross-cultural awareness, teaching and learning strategies to help international students whom they recruited hard to come to the U.S. The significance of such awareness is highlighted by

the *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange* (2015), which revealed that nearly a million (974,926 to be exact) international students left their home countries to study in America in the 2014-2015 academic year, which is an all-time high.

With added understanding of silence, faculty and staff can help the Chinese students participate more, engage more, and ultimately communicate and learn more. Chinese students can learn that consciously breaking silence can be a good thing in America in certain situations, and can help them to augment their communication styles. One cannot shed their culture values in a short period of time, but they can expand their understanding and skills. As noted in the literature review, assimilation is difficult (Tas, 2013) and any practical suggestions which could improve the educational or intercultural experience would be a good thing.

Some American students showed their sympathy in the interviews. "They can't just step over their own boundaries and start to speak all of a sudden. They need to adjust and understand the American culture and how it is in education." Another point of view was: "Professors shouldn't be making assumptions. They're international students; they won't be automatically the same as American students." Indeed, a friendly communication environment with an attitude of acceptance from the local community should help decrease the communication apprehension of foreigners. (Yu & Chia-Fang, 2008) This may in turn facilitate Chinese students' willingness to break silence and speak up, as well as ameliorate cross-cultural communication and relationships. Teachers should acknowledge the presence of Chinese and other international students who potentially may enrich the classroom with varying perspectives, which will benefit both

the teachers and the students. Perhaps these steps may get closer to *empathetic* understanding, as opposed to *sympathetic*.

Different trainings would help faculty and staff to recognize the challenges the students face, and in turn they could diplomatically attempt to encourage active participation in an academic context, and advise Chinese students in a more informed way. Faculty, staff, and students could also add an appreciation and understanding for cultural uses of silence, so that the burden of communicating is not on one culture or the other. This parallels the finding category “*cross-cultural activities*”. One thing worth noting is that some Chinese students mentioned that their attitude about silence changed slightly after they arrived in America, as stated in the finding category “*cultural assimilation*”. Their “silence is golden” thinking changed to include the importance of verbal communication in conversations with Americans, at least among this sample of participants.

A common thread in the suggestions made by both student groups is that the dominant culture might be more sensitive to its subcultures, for example, Chinese culture, by accepting who they are and what they do, without transforming or imposing on them. One might also expect that the Chinese students, the guest cultural group, should respect, adjust and adapt to the host American culture’s standards, beliefs, values and norms that endorse active and free speech. Cultural diversity potentially benefits all members involved.

Limitations

This study faced certain limitations worth noting. All of the American participants were exposed to a higher level of intercultural experiences with Chinese students, which is reflected in the findings – category “*meaningful interaction creates understanding*”. In this regard, they might be more conscious, insightful and sophisticated about cultural differences. One of them even said, “I don’t perceive it (silence) as a bad thing, but *normal Americans* will for sure consider it as negative.” Adding more American students who have not had any interactions with international students might result in the same or a different view from “*normal Americans*.” The findings may have greater instructive significance. However, these participants were able to show it is possible to learn more about another culture.

The snowball selection process that was employed to locate participants was effective in terms of getting the desired amount of participants. However, in the American group, the vast majority (9 out of 10) were female participants. While this is not necessarily a problem, it is possible that a group primarily of one gender may have shared experiences that would not necessarily be present in a more mixed gender group. As noted above, this group has extensive amount of experience with international students by working for units on campus that deal directly with international study, language and culture. Interestingly, these units are primarily staffed by females. So it is understandable why the snowball process would lead to these similar participants. In the future, it would be beneficial to seek out a more mixed gender group to ensure a variety of perceptions are being included.

Also, the Chinese interviews were transcribed and translated by the author herself. The tremendous amount of time and energy to make transcriptions limited the number of questions to get at more in-depth experiences— a more exhaustive study might produce a clearer or different outcome. There also might be some inevitable errors in translations, which did not fully reach the original, proper meaning, especially translations involving idioms or slang.

Future Directions

All the interviews were conducted with the students from CSUC and it was a small study group. As Wang & Mallinckrodt (2006) pointed out, campus difference could be a significant contextual factor, because of different attitudes towards international students vary in different regions. Therefore, participants from several different universities would be an interesting next step, which would also definitely strengthen the credibility of the research findings. Also, the majority students from CSUC may have limited social contact and less experience communicating with international Chinese students, as the number of Chinese students is relatively low in Chico compared to other universities. To build off the findings, a future project might test the suggestion that with training, better intercultural interactions could be expected. Using videos of the different classroom experience could be used to see if that helps students better interact with one another sooner as well as discover if teachers understand their students' reactions more easily.

Conclusion

This paper was designed to explore perceptions around the phenomenon of silence as used in communication between Chinese and American students. It sought to provide insight into how to respond to silence in culturally diverse conversations and communication in the classroom. The findings revealed the misunderstandings related to silence and the contributing factors were discussed with the implications of use in the university setting. This study offers a framework for the differences between American and Chinese uses of silence, in the hopes of promoting a multilayered understanding of the diverse ways in which people from different cultures communicate.

This research demonstrates that there is a major discrepancy between the Chinese and American interpretation of the meaning and use of silence. The Chinese communication style is filled with the use and appreciation of silence, while the American style is quite nearly the opposite. The reasons for these varying views and discovered perceptions held by students from both of these cultures were explored. The lack of English proficiency is but one factor that contributes to the misunderstanding of silence, but certainly not the critical factor. Moreover, given the other two themes, differences between the two educational systems, and overall cultures, are equally, if not *more* important, at the core of the misunderstandings of Chinese students' silence.

The different educational systems and cultural backgrounds lead the Chinese students to behave in a way that they believe is appropriate and respectful in an American classroom. However, such behavior is often misunderstood. They have difficulty adopting American classroom behaviors and applying their conversational rules. The

risks of misunderstanding and communication break-down, loom large in the new milieu, as more universities recruit more international students. Communication between people from different cultures, evidently, is based on an accumulative cultural knowledge and social experiences. Miscommunication is produced by divergent knowledge and assumptions (Roberts, Jupp & Davies, 1992).

In a theoretical sense, this research may help the development of intercultural understanding in communication. In a practical sense, its implication offers the teachers, course planners, academic advisers, international student advisors, and students themselves a new way of understanding Chinese students' communication style. Reciprocally, better prepared international students may assimilate easier into the U.S. academic environment.

There will always be problems when two different cultures come together with the desire of communicating their thoughts and ideas, their feelings and beliefs. The reasons for our differences run deep. But when both sides are diligent and empathetic in their efforts to bridge the gaps in the understanding of one another, these experiences ultimately bring people closer. The beauty of relationships, coming to know and understand another person of another culture, reflects the beauty and diversity of our world. It is with this great hope that this paper is presented.

Ideally, moving toward a place where we can celebrate another people's culture helps us to be aware that no one culture has the very best way to communicate. Each culture may have a very healthy way to communicate on its own, but working to

communicate together creates a joyful interaction. An understanding of cultural disparity and an improvement of communication is all that matters.

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Appendix A

CONSENT FORM

I (Print Name) _____ agree to be a part of an interview for Yuzhuo Sun, a graduate student in the Communication Studies Program at California State University, Chico. I understand this student and her work is supervised by Dr. Susan Avanzino, a faculty member in the Communication Studies Program. I understand the graduate student may use this interview, or parts of it, in presentations, publications and/or their seminar paper. I understand that the interview questions are about my experiences as they relate to the topic of interest. The interview may take approximately half an hour. If I agree to be participate, my name will remain confidential in any work produced.

I understand there is no risk to me in participating in the study and that my participation is encouraged, appreciated, and voluntary. If I begin to feel uncomfortable while answering the questions, I will let the researcher know and we can stop the taping and/or I can chose to not answer certain questions and/or stop the interview. There will be no consequences if I decide not to participate or want to discontinue the interview.

I understand that this interview will be audio recorded and will be stored within a secure environment and destroyed once the project is complete. I also understand that my participation in the interviews will be a valuable component of this research. I have been informed that I can request a summary of the findings at a later date.

For further questions about this research I may contact either the graduate student Yuzhuo Sun by Email at comac.zhuo@gmail.com, or Dr. Susan Avanzino in the Communication Arts and Sciences Department at CSU, Chico at (530) 898-6850 or by email at savanzino@csuchico.edu.

Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

As a communication major, I am studying the ways students communicate with each other at the university. More specifically, I am interested in nonverbal and intercultural communication in the university setting. I am going to ask you some questions so we can talk about these interests. Please note there are no right or wrong answers, I am only interested in your experience, perceptions and thoughts. Limiting your responses to the university setting, I would like your opinions about the following questions:

I. To start, I would like to ask you some questions about discussion in general and the use of silence.

- 1.** Tell me about your experience with silence in conversations or discussions.
 - a. For example - How would you describe “silence” in general, When do you perceive someone as being silent? What are the characteristics?
 - i. How long does silence last?
 - ii. When is sign that silence is over?
- 2.** How do you feel when a person is silent?
 - a. Comfortable, hesitant, anxious?
 - b. What do you do in the conversation when someone is silent?
- 3.** Do you think silence is good, bad, or neutral for good communication?
 - a. If it is both good and bad, tell me about that.
 - b. How do you describe good silence and bad silence in conversations?

II. Now I specifically want to ask you about your observations and feelings when you are in a conversation or discussion in a university setting with Chinese/American students. (For example: a study group, partner work, social conversation with a classmate, discussion class, when both cultures are present...)

- 4.** Tell me about your general experiences with conversations or discussions you've had with students from the Chinese/American culture on campus.
 - a. What have those experiences been like? Good, difficult, interesting, confusing?

- 5.** Have you observed a difference in the use of silence between the two cultures?
 - a. How so? In what ways are your culture represented by silence?
 - b. Do you think there are other, different characteristics to silence in the Chinese/American culture?
- 6.** Prior to this conversation, have you ever thought about how silence may be used differently between Chinese and American students?
- 7.** What role if any, do you think differences between Chinese and American culture may play in your perceptions of “silence” with other students? Have you had any experience of misunderstanding caused by silence? Elaborate.
- 8.** Any suggestions for how students can cope with misunderstandings caused by silence?
 - a. If you do not understand when a student from the other culture is silent, what would you do? What would you say or do?
- 9.** So in conclusion, what might I write to sum up your perception of silence in communication between Chinese and American students?
 - a. Does that influence how you communicate here on campus?
- 10.** Is there anything that you’d like to add on this topic that maybe I didn’t ask you?

Thank you for your participation.