

Rethinking the Long Standing Phenomenon of Silent Chinese Students Supported by the Cultural Dimensions Theory of Hofstede

Yu Rui Liu^{1,a,*}

¹The University of East China of Science and Technology, Shanghai, 200000, China

a. 202100111@xsy.edu.pl

*corresponding author

Abstract: This article examines this phenomenon after studying the previous literature on silent students. With the surge in the number of Chinese students, more and more foreign universities have their presence, so the characteristics of Chinese student groups have become a favorite research direction of many Western scholars. The main arguments of this paper are 1) The impression of Chinese students can be summarized by the following keywords: silent, passive, and inflexible; 2) Although the descriptions are close to reality, most of the current research is limited to criticizing and judging arbitrarily, which makes these studies inevitably one-sided, self-righteous, and therefore lacking a comprehensive attitude; 3) Different cultural heritage and historical backgrounds will cause significant differences in the characteristics of local people; 4) The characteristics of Chinese students must not necessarily be negative. Consequently, this article reconsiders this problem from another perspective of cultural dimension theory. In the analysis process, this paper shows the differences between Chinese and Western cultures with the help of Hofstede's cultural dimension theory. It makes a comprehensive analysis based on China's socioeconomic and political conditions. Therefore, this paper contributes to putting forward some suggestions to improve the current education situation, emphasizing the significance of family and social education for students' growth and character development.

Keywords: Chinese students western scholars, learning characteristics, silence, passive, rethinking, culture difference, Hofstede

1. Introduction

China has always been one of the largest exporting countries for foreign students, and they can be seen in the classrooms of almost all countries globally, but it seems that these students from the East are viewed as "silent" compared to their western peers. In particular, it has been observed that Chinese graduate students tend to refrain from actively participating in classroom activities, which can puzzle or frustrate instructors [1].

The silent character of Chinese students has a lot to do with the influence of society and the school environment. These two social forms directly lead to our students not being as open and outgoing as those in the Western world. But a question arises: Is silence necessarily equal to a hostile learning

attitude? Chinese people are also silent in the domestic classroom, but the input of knowledge is the most efficient.

Intercultural communication is challenging. Uncertainty is guaranteed, and misunderstandings are a strong possibility [2]. Therefore, western scholars will feel frustrated and helpless when they confront the characteristics of Chinese students in their social environment from their standpoint. However, if Chinese students and their parents look at the attributes of our students in the Chinese social environment, their views may be different. Therefore, this article will look at Chinese students' silence characteristics from another perspective. The author wants to give this character a more comprehensive understanding rather than following the trend and criticizing it.

This article will look at the characteristics of Chinese students' perceived silence from a broader perspective: Section two consists of the literature review, which will summarize previous studies and writings on the topic of Chinese students and their perceived passiveness in a western academic setting. Section three introduces Hofstede's cultural dimension theory, which is the primary analytical theory, and the author will combine Hofstede's theory to analyze the personality characteristics of Chinese students, which are highly related to social culture and historical background, and show that there are fundamental differences between our social forms and those of the West. Section four offers some suggestions for Chinese education, Chinese family, and Western teachers and give some thoughts about the research in this field. Consequently, this paper can prove that silence and a negative attitude to study are not equal. Section five concludes the whole article.

In this way can, Chinese students be more accurately understood rather than being forever branded as "negative silencers". Students and parents need not feel inferior or anxious. This research will help to improve students' self-confidence, generate new views on China's education system, eliminate some prejudices, and promote the further development of cross-cultural communication, that is, eliminate some long-standing misunderstandings and establish a new cognitive system. Exploring the reasons behind the misunderstanding will help western teachers be more tolerant of Chinese students in the classroom and give them more appropriate help. This is meaningful for the new understanding of Chinese education and cross-cultural communication.

2. Literature Review

Geert Hofstede's theory of cultural dimension has been widely used in analyzing, comparing, and interpreting culture and crowd characteristics. It also plays a vital role in this related field. He developed a model that identifies four primary Dimensions to assist in differentiating cultures: Power Distance (PDI), Individualism (IDV), Masculinity (MAS), and Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) [3]. Next, the article will discuss the differences between Chinese and Western social and cultural characteristics from these four aspects and make a table to show their educational behaviors intuitively.

More and more western scholars are interested in Chinese students. Among them, Helena Hing Wa reviewed the widespread views about Chinese students' learning styles observed in Western countries. The author points out that: Although Chinese students' hard work is acknowledged, they are still considered passive-obedient-learners who never question the knowledge transmitted during lectures [4]. It can be seen that there is a specific thinking set for the silence of Chinese students in this field. But at present, more and more research directions tend to review the phenomenon of silent students, which shows that the author's efforts align with the development direction of this field.

Besides, Hodkinson also mentioned the Kiasu phenomenon in "Chinese Students Participation: The Effect of Cultural Factors," which is intriguing. The author mainly looked at this matter positively and negatively [5].

However, there are some opposite voices. Yuzhuo (Snow) Sun advocated for people to listen to the silence; the author also regarded it as a misunderstood phenomenon and proposed suggestions on

how to cope with it, which significantly benefits the research in this field [6]. Binghui Li holds a similar opinion [7]. However, this silence should be considered more complex as a right, a choice, a resistance, and a strategy that students use to cope with the unfamiliar culture surrounding them. His view is silence as suitable, option, resistance, and design. Sihui Wang and Marta Moskal are from the University of Glasgow, they conducted a case study among ten postgraduate students from seven different countries, and they believed that silence had been misinterpreted. Some scholars used unique methods to explore students' silence [8]. For example, Jun Jin once used PBL to explore spoken English interaction and regarded silence as a way of communication [9].

3. Analysis Based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory

3.1. Power Distance Index (PDI)

Power Distance is related to the different solutions to the fundamental problem of human inequality [10]. Its practical significance is people's acceptance of inequality. In a considerable power distance (LPD) culture, superiors always have more rights. Even if subordinates have emotional and spiritual resistance to seniors, they will still choose to obey the orders in practice. Small power distance (SPD) is characterized by minimized inequality among the people, interdependence between less powerful people and more powerful people, a weak conception of social classes and hierarchies, and decentralization [11]. After summarizing previous studies with critical thinking, there are seven differences in educational/social phenomenon that are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Seven differences of educational/social phenomenon between Small-and Large- power distance.

Small power distance	Large power distance
Exploring with teachers or self-discovery	Being directly informed of what needs to be done in class
Student-centered educational concept	Teacher-centered educational concept
3. The internal grade of the school is vague	The internal rate of the school is clear
In the classroom, teachers and students are equal	Teachers have absolute authority to some extent
There is no apparent power distribution among students	There is a transparent power distribution among students, such as the monitor (the student who runs the whole class)
In the family, children and parents are equal.	The elder takes priority, and the young need to obey the old
In society, there is an equal relationship between the boss and his subordinates.	The boss has authority and higher status, and the subordinates need to obey and fear.

Silence is a symbol of the listener's listening carefully in LPD culture. Chinese culture, dominated by silence culture, advocates the value of "Speech is silver (or silvern), silence is golden." talking in class shows disrespect for teachers; listening quietly and attentively shows respect for teachers. This also indirectly leads to the silence of Chinese students in the classroom. However, in western culture, silence is easily regarded as a sign of indifference and incompetence; they tend to break the silence. For example, Smalltalk (a communication similar to chat) in American culture is a specific solution

to silence. Different cultural dimensions cause this difference. Therefore, silence does not represent a negative learning attitude but a manifestation of understanding and compliance with the distance between power.

3.2. Individualism (IDV) and Collectivism

In an individualistic society, relationships between people are loose, and people pay more attention to themselves or their immediate family members. A collectivistic organization pays more attention to the cohesion and influence of a group, which is the opposite of individualism. People living in collectivism are taught to obey orders at the beginning when they have the cognitive ability and always consider the interests and honor of the collective. The social prominence of individuals is preferred, with an emphasis on the truth and what is new rather than on relationships and tradition [12]. Traditional Chinese culture is more supportive of collectivism, so in the eyes of some western scholars, our students are sometimes conservative and silent. After summarizing previous studies with critical thinking, five differences in educational/social phenomenon are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Five differences of educational/social phenomenon between individualism and collectivism.

Individualism	Collectivism
Here are no fixed classes in various schools	Regular classes are necessary
2. Students are responsible for their own words and deeds	Students' behavior is directly related to the collective honor
Personal will is more important than others.	Personal feelings are subordinate to the overall interests of the team
Students choose activities according to their interests	The primary purpose of participating in the training is to enable students have a more profound concept of "collective."
5. Slightly confused	Relatively in good order

Because of individualism, western society is more extroverted and can find its position more clearly, so they have a higher degree of integration in the face of foreign cultures. In contrast, the degree of integration in Chinese society is not so high, which leads to students not giving teachers direct feedback in the classroom like western students, but this does not mean that Chinese students' learning attitude is negative.

3.3. Masculinity (MAS) and Femininity

There is a difference between the biological function and the social function [13]. Hofstede's cultural dimension theory explains that a masculinized society is success oriented and tends to worship the successful rather than care for others' feelings. They are more concerned about their life ambitions and the realization of their ideals and dreams, so the social competition is also more significant, and the pace of life is relatively faster. People live more for work and generally spend more time on work. On the contrary, a society that advocates feminization is more respectful of upbringing, teaching, and modesty than fierce competition. They are more inclined to solve problems more peacefully. The pace of life is slow, and the competition is weak, so people work for a better life. After summarizing

previous studies with critical thinking, four differences in educational/social phenomenon are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Four differences of educational/social phenomenon between Masculinity and Femininity.

Masculinity	Femininity
Material possession	Spiritual communication
2. Emphasize fairness and competition	Emphasize quality of life
3. Conquest and force	Emphasize equality and unity
Superheroes save the world.	The world is peaceful, and people live and work in peace.

More research shows that China is transitioning from a male society to a female community. Chinese culture increasingly reflects the characteristics of feminization. We do not blindly advocate force and competition but seek coexistence, harmony, and development, which are more consistent with the soft power of women. However, this kind of thinking that is more inclined to the middle will cause Chinese students to be shy about showing their ideas, which teachers will misunderstand as a learning attitude with low interest in the classroom. The Chinese undoubtedly tend to be more feminine in social circles and international relations. We will not take the initiative to provoke trouble or maliciously compete. Our way of getting along is gentle. The western culture takes “freedom, equality and competition” as its core; that is, it takes itself first in dealing with personnel, which is more masculine. In terms of interpersonal communication, China tends to be feminine. However, in terms of the competition system, the competition in China is unprecedentedly fierce. Every student tries their best to study hard [14]. But what is interesting is that migrant workers in China have left their hometowns to earn more money, and Chinese students pay attention to scores and rankings, which is the embodiment of a male society. This also shows that Chinese students are no different from male students in Western countries when they pursue excellent grades and bright prospects and attach equal importance to the classroom and learning.

3.4. Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI)

Uncertainty avoidance is the degree of panic in the face of a new experience. High uncertainty avoidance culture tends to establish more rules and regulations to enhance the stability and order of life [15]. It isn't easy to tolerate unconventional ideas and behaviors and hopes to seek consensus and the group's identity. The low degree of uncertainty avoidance society has a tolerant attitude towards uncertain things, is less constrained by conditions, and makes it easier to express their ideas. People in uncertainty-avoiding countries are also more emotional and motivated by inner nervous energy. After summarizing previous studies with critical thinking, six differences in educational/social phenomenon are illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4: Six differences of educational/social phenomenon between high uncertainty avoidance and low uncertainty avoidance.

High uncertainty avoidance	Low uncertainty avoidance
Make rules and dislike new ideas	Accept new things
Stability and long-term purpose	Instability and new things
Colleges and universities have counselors to arrange students' lives.	Colleges and universities are highly free.
The school plans the whole process of students' learning	Independent learning
Work hard to determine the future	Less constrained learning objectives
More rigorous	More casual

In countries with low uncertainty avoidance, such as the United States, Denmark, and Finland, people will readily accept the instability in life and unusual ideas and practices. To some extent, this has also led to their students being more adventurous, which has indirectly led to their higher level of activity in the classroom; the more robust a culture's tendency to avoid uncertainty, the greater its need for rules [16] Chinese students have a high degree of uncertainty avoidance. They worry about whether their answers are correct or not and whether they will be criticized and laughed at if their answers are wrong, which also leads to their shyness.

4. Discussion

Chinese students do not choose to remain silent, but more because of their cultural and historical background. However, the lack of interaction does not mean the absence of ideology. Therefore, the article believes that the defect of Chinese students' silence phenomenon has been enlarged to some extent.

But most importantly, teachers need to understand that silence is the absence of talk, not the absence of thought [17]. Therefore, the specific social background of China has led to the silence of Chinese students, but they still actively participate in thinking. However, this learning feature is unsuitable for Western teaching methods, but it still cannot be classified as a "negative" learning attitude.

Both western teachers and Chinese students should make efforts to change this situation. Chinese students should try their best to express themselves in class. Western teachers should try their best to understand this situation, give patience to students, and gradually guide them.

Although this paper believes that silence is not necessarily a negative learning attitude, it also hopes that Chinese students can have better performance and higher integration in the international classroom. Besides, we also need to acknowledge the shortcomings of the education system. Chinese classrooms before the reforms were not conducive to cultivating creativity and innovation [18]. Therefore, this paper also discusses some ways to improve this phenomenon.

4.1. Background

A series of policies implemented by the national government is conducive to social mobility and promoting the education of the whole society. However, such reform is not enough for individuals because all policies are based on certain realities, just as education reform is based on a particular social structure. Currently, China cannot provide comprehensive education reform to serve the entire population. This is the status quo and cannot be changed instantly.

4.2. Parents' Promoting Family Education

What Chinese parents need to consider is to start to incorporate an education concept that is unfamiliar to Chinese people into their children's growth - family education. Family education should be the "supplement" of the missing elements of school education to build an education network that connects family, school, and society. This spontaneous activity of many parents has been seen as a valuable contribution to children's educational progress, and attempts to enhance the involvement of all parents are now widespread [19]. Faced with students' silence, parents can exercise their children's verbal expression ability and desire at home, take children to videos of foreign classroom teaching, etc.

4.3. Teachers' Needs to Improve Students' Participation in the Classroom

Participation may include voluntarily responding to questions posed to the class, asking questions in class, and initiating or contributing to class discussion [20]. Thus, participation can be divided into different types. Teachers can gradually understand which education mode is more suitable for students in the teaching process. Some students have strong critical thinking and are more suitable for putting forward retort opinions or questions. Some students are better at solving and listening and more suitable for answering questions. It is a feasible way to teach students in accordance with their aptitude as much as possible so that students can improve their participation in their comfort zone first.

4.4. The Necessity to Release Excessive Schoolwork Pressure

It has been widely reported that the heavy schoolwork burden has caused suffering, fear, and a dislike of studying in the students, resulting in truancy and even suicide in some instances [21]. To some extent, this will cause students' fear of the classroom and teachers, leading to a generation of silent characters. The more direct way to solve this problem is to reduce the students' homework burden, seek new education programs and teacher programs, and let students get a diversified learning environment as much as possible (e.g., PISA exam, STEM education). This is good for the cultivation of personal quality and confidence.

5. Conclusion

While the number of Chinese students studying abroad has rapidly increased, more and more differences between China and foreign countries have started to appear. This article focuses on a group of silent Chinese students who studies the causes and significance behind 'silence' with the help of Hofstede's cultural dimension theory and reconsider this phenomenon. Based on the idea of cultural dimension, the article combines students' silence with cultural differences, further proving the relationship between silence and negative learning attitudes is relatively obscure. Such research will contribute to future cross-cultural communication and understanding of particular groups. This article also has limitations in that cultural phenomena and society are diversified, and sometimes it is inevitable to be rigid by using one fixed standard to summarize the overall characteristics of one certain culture highly. On the other hand, this article should also adapt some specific examples to support the idea. These can be improved in future studies, but it is admitted that this study has inspired future studies to pay attention to the group of silent Chinese students.

References

- [1] Lu, Chunlei, and Wenchun Han. "Why don't they participate? A self-study of Chinese graduate students' classroom: Involvement in North America." *Brock Education Journal* 20.1 (2010).

- [2] Sun, Yuzhuo. "Listen to the silence-it speaks: understanding Chinese university student perceptions of silence during intercultural communication." (2016).
- [3] Xiumei, S. H. I., and W. A. N. G. Jinying. "Cultural distance between China and US across GLOBE model and Hofstede model." *International Business and Management* 2.1 (2011): 11-17.
- [4] Sit, Helena Hing Wa. "Characteristics of Chinese students' learning styles." *International proceedings of economics development and research* 62 (2013): 36.
- [5] Hodkinson, Chris S., and Arthur E. Poropat. "Chinese students' participation: The effect of cultural factors." *Education+ Training* (2014).
- [6] Sun, Yuzhuo. "Listen to the silence-it speaks: understanding Chinese university student perceptions of silence during intercultural communication." (2016).
- [7] Ha, Phan Le, and Binghui Li. "Silence as right, choice, resistance and strategy among Chinese 'Me Generation' students: Implications for pedagogy." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 35.2 (2014): 233-248.
- [8] Wang, Sihui, and Marta Moskal. "What is wrong with silence in intercultural classrooms? An insight into international students' integration at a UK university." *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education* 11 (2019): 52-58.
- [9] Jin, Jun, and Susan M. Bridges. "Educational technologies in problem-based learning in health sciences education: a systematic review." *Journal of medical internet research* 16.12 (2014): e3240.
- [10] Hofstede, Geert. "Dimensionalizing cultures: The Hofstede model in context." *Online readings in psychology and culture* 2.1 (2011): 2307-0919.
- [11] Zepeng Zhang. *Cultural Differences in Employing The Phrase "Thank You" between Chinese And Americans*. MS thesis. Xi'an Foreign Studies University, 2015.
- [12] Cronjé, Johannes C. "Using Hofstede's cultural dimensions to interpret cross-cultural blended teaching and learning." *Computers & Education* 56.3 (2011): 596-603.
- [13] Satam, Hussein, and Hussein Wisam. "Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions (Masculinity Vs. Femininity) And Its Impact On Earnings Management." *Opción: Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales* 35 (2019): 2953.
- [14] Fang Kuang, and Dexin Tian. "The Difference between Chinese and Western opinions on Kiasu phenomenon from the Hofstede Cultural Dimension -- Take the American TV series "New Arrival" as an example"
- [15] Jinying Yang. "Cultural Differences and Fusion between China and the United States in the Movie Sun Tzu Comes from America Based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Model."
- [16] Merkin, Rebecca S. "Uncertainty avoidance and facework: A test of the Hofstede model." *International Journal of intercultural relations* 30.2 (2006): 213-228.
- [17] Zhouyuan, Y. U. "The analysis about the factors of silence in college English classroom." *Studies in Literature and Language* 12.5 (2016): 105-110.
- [18] Lockette, Kenneth F. "Creativity and Chinese education reform." *International Journal of Global Education (IJGE)* ISSN: 2146-9296 1.4 (2012).
- [19] Desforges, Charles, and Alberto Abouchaar. *The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment: A literature review*. Vol. 433. London: DfES, 2003.
- [20] Rachel Zhou, Yanqiu, Della Knoke, and Izumi Sakamoto. "Rethinking silence in the classroom: Chinese students' experiences of sharing indigenous knowledge." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 9.3 (2005): 287-311.
- [21] Tan, Charlene. "PISA and education reform in Shanghai." *Critical Studies in Education* 60.3 (2019): 391-406.