Student K

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Breaking the Silence of Chinese International Students

**I. Background**

Between the years of 2011-2012, it was reported by the Institute of International Education that 60% of the 764,495 enrolled international students in America came from an Asian background (as cited in Chu, 2013, para. 2). Within the 60%, Chinese international students make up a significant portion of the total Asian international student population. The Chinese international students face a variety of difficulties due to differences in culture (Chu 2013).

Of these cultural differences, differences in expected classroom behavior play a major role in misunderstandings between faculty and Chinese international students. Many professors have reported or complained that Chinese international students are too silent during class and that they lack participation in classroom activities (Chu, 2013; Liu, 2002; Stevens, 2012).

The reason behind the silence of Chinese international students, however, is not because of a lack of interest in the course. While asking questions is preferred in the American classroom, it is considered to be rude for a student to interrupt a lecture with a question in a Chinese classroom (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.; Chu, 2013). This contrast in classroom culture has led to a lack of interaction between U.S. faculty and Chinese international students.

Many articles have focused on the effects of this cultural difference on the Chinese international student population. However, little has been mentioned about whether the faculty contribute to the negative effects of this cultural difference.

**II. Argument**

As a part of the Chinese community, I chose to research the differences in expected classroom behaviors in China and America. These differences have created conflicts between U.S. faculty and Chinese international students. Although faculty are aware that Chinese international students come from different cultural backgrounds, it seems that they are unsure about the approaches to take to bridge these differences. How do faculty’s response to the silence of Chinese international students’ affect these students’ academic success? When faculty take action to create a classroom atmosphere where Chinese international students feel comfortable participating, Chinese international students are more likely to achieve academic success.

**III. Analysis**

One of the many approaches faculty take in response to Chinese international students’ silence is nothing. The reason for faculty’s lack of action to encourage Chinese international students to participate in classroom activities was because the faulty were unsure about the approaches to take. It was stated in Yiting Chu’s (2013) research paper that professors had little experience in teaching international students. As a result, professors do not know about the cultural differences which Chinese international students bring in. Such lack of action of delve into understanding the Chinese culture led faculty to subconsciously believe in negative stereotypes on the silence of Chinese international students. Without knowledge of the Chinese culture, faculty were unaware that the silence behind the Chinese international students was culture, and not personality. Both Chu (2013) and Jun Liu (2003) stated in their research papers that professors associate Chinese international students’ silence as “passive listening” and “inactive learning”. Silence, however, is interpreted differently in the Chinese classroom. In Chinese classrooms, silence is viewed as an expression of respect to the professor, as it is considered rude to interrupt the professor’s lecture (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.). However, faculty does not take such point into consideration and felt unmotivated to encourage Chinese international students into participating due to their subconscious bias.

 Faculty’s lack of motivation to encourage Chinese international students’ into participating in classroom activities contradict with Chinese international students’ desires. In reality, Chinese international students were waiting for the faculty to encourage them to participate. As Yiting Chu (2013) quoted a Chinese international student involved in a study, Randy stated that pressure may have been the factor Chinese international students were waiting for. Chinese international students restrain themselves from asking questions in classroom activities because they felt restricted by their culture. If faulty were to encourage Chinese international students to ask questions in class, Chinese international students would feel that they are given permission to ask the questions that are within their minds. However, faculty are unaware that Chinese international students wanted pressure. As a result, Chinese international students maintain their silence in class and restrict themselves from asking question. Such lack of participation increases the academic burden upon Chinese international students because they restrict themselves from asking for clarification on subjects they are confused in. Consequently, the Chinese international students’ probability of achieving academic success plummets as they suffer from lower grades in participation and incomplete understanding of the topics taught in class.

In contrast, Chinese international students are able to free themselves from their cultural restraints and be bolder in asking questions when faculty take action to bridge the cultural barrier. Many professors used a variety of methods to create a learning atmosphere where Chinese international students felt comfortable to ask questions. Two of the many methods were to allow students to initiate some of the discussions in class and the professor’s expression of passion in teaching the subject. As quoted by Yiting Chu (2013), Randy noticed that professors allowed students to take the stage instead of being the center voice of the classroom. By allowing the students be the ones that initiate the discussion in the classroom, Chinese international students recognize that there is no hierarchy between the professor and themselves. In addition, another international student, Mike, stated that the professor’s evident passion in the concepts taught had encouraged him to participate in class (as cited in Chu, 2013, para. 49). The passion expressed by professors transform the subject into a more interesting topic. At the same time, enthusiasm allow professors to appear easier to approach. Hence, Chinese international students felt less tense about asking questions in this relaxed classroom atmosphere. With an increase in participation and question asking rate in classroom activities, Chinese international students would not only receive higher scores in their participation grades, they would also have a better understanding of the concepts taught in class. In addition, such increase in classroom participation may encourage Chinese international students to further develop their communication skills by initiating conversations with their domestic peers.

**IV. Conclusion**

 The results from the research illustrated the importance of faculty’s response to the silence of Chinese international student. It is necessary for faculty to take action and create a classroom environment where Chinese international students feel comfortable in expressing their opinions, as it greatly impacts their learning experiences. With encouragement from faculty, Chinese international students are able to take the courageous step forward and break free from their cultural restraints. They become bolder in speaking their own minds and ask questions when there is a concept they do not understand. As a result, Chinese international students have a better understanding of the concepts introduced in class. Without needing to carry the additional burden of answering all their questions on their own, the path of academic success becomes brighter and clearer for Chinese international students.

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