

THE ATTITUDE OF CHINESE STUDENTS TOWARDS DISCUSSING POLITICS IN FRONT OF NON-
CHINESE

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ABSTRACT

The attitude towards discussing politics in front of non-Chinese of Chinese postgraduate students studying at Newcastle University UK as well as the reasons behind it are explored by this research. In addition, other social variables are also taken into consideration, such as gender, major of participants, province that participants used to live and the time that participants have spent in the UK, to examine whether those factors influence the attitude of Chinese students towards discussing politics in intercultural communication. A survey is chosen as the main way for data collection, and 71 responses have been received from Chinese students studying at Newcastle University, UK. The results indicate that Chinese postgraduate students tend to consider politics as a taboo topic in intercultural communication, influenced by social factors such as gender and major. This finding is later explained in terms of the impact of the foreign environment and the education they have received.

INTRODUCTION

The development of globalisation and technology has driven more international students, especially those students from developing countries, to study in world-renowned universities. For example, there are 120,385 and 369,548 Chinese students in the British and American universities respectively during the academic year of 2018-2019 (BBC 2019; UKCISA 2019). The inclusiveness of international universities makes interaction more frequent between people from different countries. However, in intercultural communication, certain knowledge about the communication etiquette in the targeted culture is needed, as culture misunderstanding on both sides might occur without communication etiquette (Kasper 2005). In other words, communicators from different cultures need to know what they are ought to say or not in a certain cultural context, which is closely related to the existence of taboo in most societies. In definition, taboo means those verbal or non-verbal behaviours that could cause harm to the other party and need to be deliberately avoided in the conversation to maintain a harmonious communication (Heins 2007; McEnery 2006). Generally speaking, taboo, based on its scope of application, could be classified into global taboo and culturally specific taboo (Qanbar 2011). The former refers to those offensive words closely correlated to the body excretion, sex or death that are forbidden in most societies (Gao 2013). Euphemism is widely used in daily communication to replace those words with regard to the global taboo (Fernández 2005). On the other hand, culturally specific taboo also exists referring to the words or topics solely considered as forbidden among certain cultural groups (Phuong-Mai et al. 2005). The study of taboo is of practical significance as the culturally specific taboo might cause misunderstanding in daily intercultural communication. More recently, it is increasingly notable that Chinese students prefer not to discuss politics in front of non-Chinese with the increasing number of Chinese students studying in foreign universities. The model of “SLHU” framework explaining this phenomenon in

the research of Hail (2015) is explained in detail in the next part. However, few studies have investigated the influence of other social factors such as gender or major. As a result, this study aims to explore whether Chinese students consider politics as a taboo area in the intercultural communication, as well as the reason behind it and the social variables which might exert influence. Specifically, related literature regarding global taboos and culturally specific taboos is firstly introduced in this study. The methodology is followed by the data presentation and in-depth discussion in the next part. Finally, advantages and constraints are also discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study mainly discusses whether politics is a taboo topic for Chinese students to be covered in intercultural communication. The intercultural communication context at an international institution is first established in this section by using the number of Chinese students in British and American universities during the academic year of 2018-2019. Related literature about the origin and definition of taboo is then explored, from the perspective of the global taboo and culturally specific taboo. Besides, the use of euphemism for global taboo in order to avoid offensive conversations is also covered. Culturally specific taboo varies across cultures, and the lack of knowledge might cause misunderstanding and reduce the efficiency of intercultural communication. Lastly, previous literature about whether Chinese students consider politics as a taboo area in intercultural communication is specifically discussed in this study.

The influence of Globalisation

British and American universities have increasingly gained popularity among Chinese students. For example, 120,385 and 369,548 Chinese students respectively studied in British and American universities during the academic year of 2018-2019 (BBC 2019; UKCISA 2019). Under the ideal circumstance, the

interaction between students from different countries might contribute to the constructive exchange of cultures (Gunesch 2004). However, according to Andrade (2006), Gareis (2012), Marginson (2007) and Trice (2003), the ideal culture exchange rarely exists in intercultural communication. As is argued by the Sorrells (2016), language is complex and includes both verbal and non-verbal behaviour, and if the cultural context behind is not understood, the transcultural translation of language will lead to the misunderstanding or even conflict. As language is one of the basic carriers in intercultural communication, the lack of understanding about language rules in the targeted culture context might have the counterproductive effect.

The definition of taboo

The word “taboo” was first found by the British navigator James Cook as a phenomenon in the journey to South Pacific in 1777. It was derived from Tonga dialect "ta bu" which initially was used as a word to represent the inviolable things (Lei 2019). In a broad sense, “taboo” refers to those verbal or non-verbal behaviours restricted or forbidden under the assumption that it will cause harm to the other party (Heins 2007; McEnergy 2006). From the individual level, the term of “taboos” refers to those words used to describe the lexicon of offensive emotion, and it is frequently associated with the word “Swear”. Since language is a common verbal form of culture, the research of Wardhaugh (2000) further proposed the concept of “Taboo Language” to describe those words which are vulgar or rude and might even cause aggression against the other party. Whether taboo words or actions constitute offences lacks universal standards due to the varied criteria for taboo language formed by communicators through their daily socialisation (Jay et al. 2006). In other words, the judgement can be influenced by social factors such as social-physical setting, speaker-listener relationship, the tone of voice or the sensitivity of listeners (Jay & Janschewitz 2007,2008; Locher & Watts 2005). On the other end of the spectrum, from the institutional level, Allan and Burridge (2006) explained “taboo” as the

actions or words being religiously, culturally, or socially forbidden in certain cultural context, which is socially constructed by those in power.

The classification of taboo

Global taboo

Generally speaking, there are two types of taboos, and one is global taboos which can be applied in most societies and the other one is culturally specific taboos which exist only in certain cultural groups (Qanbar 2011). Allan and Burridge (2006) divided global taboos into four categories of bad language, taboo naming and addressing, dirty words and bad fortune. Specifically, bad language refers to jargon, or swearing words contained in the conversation, while taboo naming and addressing means calling others in an assaulting way. Dirty words frequently contain the body organs or impurities especially those related to sex, and bad fortune represents those words associated with death or diseases. Different from the research of Allan and Burridge (2006), the research of Ljung (2011) and Mohr (2013) analysed taboo in swearing words specifically. Swearing words were classified by Ljung (2011) into major and minor themes, with the major theme mainly including swearing words related to religious, scatology or sex. On the contrary, the minor theme mainly includes swearing words associated with the ancestor's death or prostitution. Meanwhile, Mohr (2013) suggested that swearing words can vary according to the development of social context.

The needs of being polite in communication have increased with the advance of civilisation (Streeck & Knapp, 2002). Euphemism is widely used in daily communication in varied cultures to avoid the offence caused by the utilise of taboo words (Fernánde 2005). According to its definition, euphemisms are the substitution of taboo words used to refer to something unpleasant in an implicit or mild expression (Gómez 2009). Based on its pragmatic function, Wang (2019) pointed out that the use of euphemism could lead to the

harmonious relationship especially in intercultural communication by avoiding the misunderstanding caused by varied cultural background.

Culturally specific taboos

When it comes to culturally specific taboos, some verbal or non-verbal behaviours are solely considered as offensive in a certain social context (Phuong-Mai et al. 2005). Taboo language exists in every society around the world, representing their own special culture and history. The research of Gao (2013) pointed out that although whether the difference between collectivism and individualism should be the factors that determinate the characteristic of western and eastern communicators has not been decided, their basic understanding towards daily communication etiquette is influenced by the difference. To be more specific, eastern and western communicators, influenced by different cultural contexts, have different understandings of personal privacy. For individualism, personal affairs such as age, weight, income or even marital status should not be covered in daily communication from the perspective of western communicators (Deng & Liu 1989). However, this is not what happens among Chinese communicators. Deng and Liu (1989) attributed it to the existence of a communal spirit which emphasises the importance of the community they belong to. Furthermore, Lei (2016) identified that western and eastern societies, influenced by different cultures and histories, have varied taboo language system in terms of names, number, colours or animals. In English countries, because the death of Jesus and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden both happened on Friday, people think Friday is a taboo word representing bad luck (Lei 2016). On contrast, influenced by the ancient statement “the Ming nine, Dark nine, no dead or sick.” (Lei 2016, p.758), nine is a taboo figure in the age in the Chinese context, and communicators avoid using multiples of nine when referring to age, especially the age of the elderly (Lei 2016).

Nevertheless, language is not immutable, which means that some of the oldest taboos are lost with the advance of human civilisation, and the development of globalisation has changed the social custom and created new taboos (Burridge 2012). Fershtman, Gneezy and Hoffman (2011) believed that the new forms of taboo, compared with traditional ones, are generated with the establishment of new types of relations between different social groups. To be more specific, women and several developing countries have gradually gained power after World War II, which has created a series of new taboos in the politics and gender area (Guyo 2017). Since euphemisms are produced along with taboos, the politically correct language as new kinds of euphemisms in modern society has been identified by Boyadzhieva (2012), which avoids the bias towards other cultural groups.

Modern taboo in intercultural communication

As is mentioned, the taboo is a social phenomenon including some kinds of behaviours solely considered as offensive by a certain group of communicators (Trudgill 2000). With the increasing number of Chinese international students, it is observed in recent years that Chinese communicators feel being offended when they are being asked about their political views (Rui 2019). Research of Nadine (2004) related this sense of feeling to the existence of patriotism shaped by education. Based on this idea, Hail (2015) specified the research object to Chinese students, further examining the reasons for not preferring to discuss politics with non-Chinese and developing the model of “SLHU” to further categorise them. According to Hail (2015), the following reasons might explain the phenomenon. Firstly, “S” means Status-based Mode referring to the tendency that they feel uncomfortable about the way non-Chinese talk about China. Secondly, “L” means Loyalty-based Mode which indicates that they think showing loyalty to China in front of non-Chinese is of great importance. Additionally, “H” means Harmony-seeking Mode, which means they prefer not to discuss

politics in front of non-Chinese in order to avoid conflicts and remain the ingroup or outgroup harmony. Finally, “U” means Utilitarian Mode, which signifies that Chinese students feel uncomfortable discussing politics with non-Chinese in the situation where the conversation hurts the political and economic interests of their home country. In this study, the specific topics that Chinese international students may encounter in their interaction are explored to test its validity and to gain an insight into the reason why they are not willing to discuss politics in front of non-Chinese.

As early as 1997, however, Schatz, Staub and Lavine (1997) claimed that the existence of patriotism does not necessarily lead to an uncomfortable feeling about hearing criticism of their country (Hail 2015). To be more specific, patriotism was classified by these scholars into constructive patriotism and blind patriotism separately referring to the attachment to the country with or without acknowledging the criticism. As a result, this research cites the questionnaire of Schatz, Staub and Lavine (1997) called “Patriotism Attitude Scale” to examine the relationship between patriotism and the willingness of Chinese students to discuss politics in front of non-Chinese. Apart from this, other social factors such as the gender or the major of participants might also play a part, which, not covered in the research by Hail (2015), is discussed in this study.

Research Methodology

In this study, a survey was conducted among 68 Chinese postgraduate students to shed light on how Chinese students perceive discussing politics in front of non-Chinese. In recent years, survey, especially questionnaire, has increasingly gained its popularity among small-scale intercultural research which is easy-accessed for researchers and participants (Young 2016). The main advantages of the questionnaire method for researchers are that they can guarantee the reliability of the research through using or adapting extant questionnaires (Zhu 2015). In addition, the data collected from questionnaires could be imported into computer software to carry

out statistical analysis, reducing the bias of researchers. With regard to participants, they could take part in the study by checking a box or numbers on the paper or online, which is relatively easy and less time-consuming (Zhu 2015). So questionnaire is a data collecting way that could be used to gather a large amount of data in a short time, which provides a relative abundance sample to investigate the central tendency among participants. Apart from these advantages, as politics is a sensitive topic, questionnaire, compared with other data collection method, allows participants to participate anonymously, which makes them more relaxed and ensures the accuracy of the data.

Aim and Research Questions

This research grapples with the overwhelming question about the taboo area in modern intercultural communication. To be more specific, it attempts to figure out the reasons behind the phenomenon that many Chinese students are reluctant to talk about the politics of China with non-Chinese. This question can be narrowed down to three sub-questions:

- (1) Are Chinese students willing to discuss politics in front of non-Chinese?
- (2) What are the reasons for the unwillingness of Chinese students to discuss politics in front of non-Chinese?
- (3) What social factors influence the willingness of Chinese students to discuss politics in front of non-Chinese?

Sampling

Sixty-eight Chinese postgraduate students at Newcastle University, UK, were selected employing convenience sampling, which is a kind of non-probability sampling referring to choosing participants for reasons such as accessibility, physical proximity or willingness to participate (Etikan et al. 2016). This study takes the form of an online questionnaire (Appendix A) distributing to the WeChat group of Chinese

postgraduate students in 2019-2020 academic year, and the voluntary participants were required to complete the questionnaire according to their intercultural communication experience.

Statistical analysis

Firstly, all the responses collected through the questionnaire are illustrated by scores imported into SPSS statistics software (IBM SPSS Statistics 26) to summarise the basic features of a data set, which includes three tests:

- Descriptive statistics measured the demographic information of participants and central tendency towards questions.
- Reliability analysis indicated the internal consistency of the research.
- Confirmatory Factor Analysis verified the validity of the designed scale.
- Bivariate Pearson correlation test measured the correlation between two variables.
- OLS regression test measured the relationship between independent variables and dependent variables.

Validity and reliability

The validity of the research means that research methods are appropriate to answer the questions (Hopkins 2017). Firstly, in the process of data collection, in addition to citing the extant questionnaire “Patriotism Attitude Scale” designed by Schatz, Staub and Lavine (1997), this study designs scale, which examine the reason why Chinese students consider politics as a taboo area in intercultural communication(Q14-Q21), based on the “SLHU” framework, the validity of which has not been tested. As a result, this study conducts a confirmation factor analysis to test whether the items contained in the “SLHU” framework could reflected the reason why Chinese students prefer not to discuss politics in front of non-Chinese. The results of confirmation factor analysis reveal that the overall goodness-of-fit of the scale designed based on “SLHU” framework is

acceptable ($\chi^2=36.35$, $df = 26$, $\chi^2/df=1.4$, $p < 0.001$ CFI = 0.9, TLI = 0.95, SRMR = 0.08, RMSEA = 0.08). further than this, as the main aim of this study is to investigate the attitude of Chinese students towards discussing politics in front of non-Chinese and the reasons behind it. Two major goals of statistical analysis are included, which are investigating the statistical and inferential meaning of the data set (Croucher & Cronn-Mills 2018).

Reliability of the research means if other researchers do this study, they would obtain similar results (Hopkins 2017). All the data were imported into SPSS statistics software to conduct a Reliability Analysis to demonstrate the reliability of this study. Specifically, to test the internal consistency between the questionnaire and data, the Cronbach's reliability coefficient of the scale was calculated with the result of 0.844, which was between the value of 0.7 and 0.9, indicating an acceptable internal consistency (Cortina 1993). Besides, the extant questionnaire designed by Schatz, Staub and Lavine (1997) and revised by Yazıcı and Yazıcı (2010) was used to guarantee the reliability of the research. However, this research also has a limitation which is discussed in detail in the part of the discussion.

Ethical considerations

First and foremost, all the participants in this study should be voluntary, and their personal information needs to be kept confidential. They could stop answering the questions if they have any concerns about taking part in the study. Secondly, the aim of this study and the protection of participants' privacy need to be clearly presented at the start of the questionnaire. The survey involved in this study is completely anonymous which means any personal information will not be asked in the questionnaire to protect the privacy of participants to the greatest extent.

Data analysis

Demographic information

Seventy-one responses have been received for this study from Chinese postgraduate students in Newcastle University, UK, conforming to the sampling criteria. However, among the participants, only three are studying for the Master of Research degree, which is not representative, so 68 valid questionnaires were finally collected. Among the 68 participants, 34 are male and the rest are female. In terms of major, 32 of them are studying for the Master of Arts, and others are studying for the Master of Science. Besides, the province that participants used to live and the length of time that participants lived in the UK are also set as social variables. Twenty-nine of the participants are from northern China, while the rest are from southern China since China has 23 provinces, and northern and southern China are divided by the Qinling Mountains and the Huaihe River (Wei, 2014). Concerning the time spent in the UK, 23 of participants have lived in the UK for less than one year, while 43 have lived in the UK for one to two years, and the rest have lived for two to five years.

Evaluation of the attitude of Chinese students

The attitude of Chinese students towards discussing politics in front of non-Chinese is examined by the Q12 and Q13 jointly, which indicates the tendency of Chinese communicators to deliberately avoid political topics in the intercultural communication with their foreign counterparts. As is reflected in Table 1, the participants strongly approve that they will deliberately avoid discussing politics in intercultural communication ($M=4.04$; $SD=.79$). On the contrary, 58% of participants tend to disapprove the opposite statements in Q13 ($M=2.13$; $SD=1.04$). Consequently, it is a central tendency among participants to not to cover political topics in their daily communication with non-Chinese.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of attitudes towards discussing politics in front of non-Chinese of Chinese judge

Items	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Q12: When I talk to non-Chinese, I deliberately avoid political topics.	68	2	5	4.0 4	0.79
Q13: I support Chinese policies because I believe they are almost always the morally correct ones.	68	1	4	2.1 3	1.04
Valid N (listwise)	68				

Evaluation of group affiliation

Table 2 indicates the extent of the participants affiliating with their home country and tolerating the criticising comments about their country, in terms of the influence of group affiliation shaped by patriotism on the attitude of Chinese students to discuss politics with their foreign counterparts. It is suggested that participants have different degrees of the agreement for the statement in the first part of the questionnaire with mean scores ranging from 2.22 to 4.03. Specifically, 76% of participants strongly approve that they support Chinese policies for the very reason that they are policies of their own country (M=4.03; SD= .82). Likewise, they also tend to agree that the correctness of the policy enhances its credibility (M=3.74; SD= .93). On the other hand, participants tend to disagree about those statements involved in the measurement of constructive patriotism, which indicates the tendency of supporting the home country and being equally tolerant of criticism, such as Q7, Q9 and Q11, with mean scores ranging from 2.00 to 3.00. In summary, participants tend to have a strong group affiliation shaped by blind patriotism.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of group affiliation of Chinese judge

Items	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Q5: I support Chinese policies for the very reason that they are the policies of my countries.	68	1	5	4.03	0.91
Q6: I support Chinese policies because I believe they are almost always the morally correct ones.	68	1	5	3.74	0.93
Q7: I oppose some Chinese policies because I care about my country and want to improve it.	68	1	5	2.62	1.11
Q8: Even if another country disagrees with Chinese policies that I knew little about, I would definitely support my country' s position.	68	2	5	3.76	0.94
Q9: If another country disagrees with Chinese policies that I knew little about, I would not necessarily support my country' s position.	68	1	5	2.22	1.01
Q10: Even if I understand there might exist potential drawbacks of Chinese policies. I would support my country' s position in front of non-Chinese.	68	2	5	3.81	0.84
Q11: If I understand there might exist potential drawbacks of Chinese policies, I would not necessarily support my country' s position in front of non-Chinese.	68	1	5	2.46	1.17
Valid N (listwise)	68				

Evaluation of “SLHU” framework

When it comes to the tendency that Chinese students prefer not to discuss politics in front of non-Chinese, Q14 to Q21 are designed based on the “SLHU” framework of Hail (2015) to examine the degree of acceptance among participants towards the reasons included in this framework. Table 3 represents participants holding varied attitudes towards those reasons, with the majority feeling uncomfortable when they hear comments about splitting China ($M=4.37$; $SD=0.71$), and believing it is their duty to defend the sovereignty of China ($M=4.01$; $SD=.83$). It is also notable that the responses to Q16, Q17 and Q21 reveal an undecided situation in reaching an agreement among the participants with the mean score from 3.00 to 4.00.

Although Table 3 indicates that Chinese students hold varied attitudes towards different items contained in the framework of “SLHU”, little evidence exists for whether these variables correlate with the willingness of Chinese students to discuss in front of non-Chinese. Consequently, Bivariate analysis needs to be employed to test their correlation with Q12. As is shown in Table 4, the willingness of participants towards discussing politics in intercultural communication significantly correlates with their sense of responsibility as Chinese and the motivation of maintaining group harmony with the p-value for Pair 6 and Pair 8 less than .001. Moreover, whether the participants would feel uncomfortable when hearing bad comments about their country is measured in Q16, Q17 and Q18, which relate to the tendency to avoid discussing politics in intercultural communication ($.001 < p < .05$). On the contrast, there is no significant correlation between the willingness of participants to discuss politics and other items in intercultural communication ($p > 0.05$).

Table 3 Descriptive statistics of “SLHU” framework of Chinese judge

Items	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Q5: I support Chinese policies for the very reason that they are the policies of my countries.	68	1	5	4.03	0.91
Q6: I support Chinese policies because I believe they are almost always the morally correct ones.	68	1	5	3.74	0.93
Q7: I oppose some Chinese policies because I care about my country and want to improve it.	68	1	5	2.62	1.11
Q8: Even If another country disagrees with Chinese policies that I knew little about, I would definitely support my country' s position.	68	2	5	3.76	0.94
Q9: If another country disagrees with Chinese policies that I knew little about, I would not necessarily support my country' s position.	68	1	5	2.22	1.01
Q10: Even if I understand there might exist potential drawbacks of Chinese policies. I would support my country' s position in front of non-Chinese.	68	2	5	3.81	0.84
Q11: If I understand there might exist potential drawbacks of Chinese policies, I would not necessarily support my country' s position in front of non-Chinese.	68	1	5	2.46	1.17
Valid N (listwise)	68				

Table 4 Correlation Analyses for the Relationship between “SLHU” framework and the attitude of Chinese

	Trait	P
Pair 1	Q12: When I talk to non-Chinese, I deliberately avoid political topics. Q14: I feel uncomfortable when I hear negative comments about my country from non-Chinese.	0.066
Pair 2	Q12: When I talk to non-Chinese, I deliberately avoid political topics. Q15: I find it understandable when I hear negative comments about my country from non-Chinese.	0.406
Pair 3	Q12: When I talk to non-Chinese, I deliberately avoid political topics. Q16: I am uncomfortable with the way non-Chinese comment on China.	**
Pair 4	Q12: When I talk to non-Chinese, I deliberately avoid political topics. Q17: I am uncomfortable with the content of non-Chinese comments on China.	*
Pair 5	Q12: When I talk to non-Chinese, I deliberately avoid political topics. Q18: I feel uncomfortable when I hear things like "Tibet does not belong to China"	*
Pair 6	Q12: When I talk to non-Chinese, I deliberately avoid political topics. Q19: It is my duty as a Chinese to state China's position on Tibetan sovereignty in	***

	front of non-Chinese	
Pair 7	Q12: When I talk to non-Chinese, I deliberately avoid political topics. Q20: In front of non-Chinese, I would choose to remain silent on the issue of Tibetan sovereignty in order to avoid conflict of views	0.123
Pair 8	Q12: When I talk to non-Chinese, I deliberately avoid political topics. Q21: When Han Chinese and Tibetans argue over Tibetan sovereignty in front of non-Chinese, I think both sides are at fault	***
***p<0.001. **p<0.01. *p<0.05		

Evaluation of social factors

However, whether other social factors, such as gender, major, the province where used to live in China or length of stay in the UK, influencing the attitude of participants towards discussing politics in front of non-Chinese is not decided. Q12, which measure the willingness of Chinese students to discuss politics in front of non-Chinese, need to be tested separately with Q1, Q2, Q3 and Q4 in a bivariate test and regress test. As it could be concluded from the Table 6, the regress test show that gender significantly affecting the attitude of participants towards discussing politics in intercultural communication ($p < .001$), which also influenced by the major of participants ($p < .05$).

On the contrast, for those independent variables ($p > .05$) such us the province where used to live in China and the Length of stay in the UK, the null hypothesis that they have no correlation with the dependent variable had been tested. Under the assumption that the gender and major of participants might influence their response towards discussing politics in front of non-Chinese, this study compares the mean score that male, female,

Master of Arts and Master of Science obtain in Q12, the results of this shown in the Table 7. As shown in the table, for the response to Q12, the mean value of men is higher than that of women, and the mean value of Master of Arts is higher than that of Master of Science.

Table 5 Correlation Analyses for the Relationship between social factors and the attitude of Chinese

Factors	P
Gender	***
The province where used to live in China	0.057
Major	*
Length of stay in the UK	*
***p<0.001. **p<0.01. *p<0.05	

Table 6 Regression Analyses for the Relationship between social factors and the attitude of Chinese

Variables	b	Std. Error	t	p
Gender	-.752	.178	-4.219	***
The province where used to live in China	-.235	.187	-1.254	0.215
Major	-.247	.116	2.122	*
Length of stay in the UK	-.182	.153	1.188	0.239
Dependent Variables: Q12 When I talk to non-Chinese, I deliberately avoid political topics.				
***p<0.001. **p<0.01. *p<0.05				
R ² = 0.399 F (4.45) = 10.451				

Table 7 The mean evaluation of discussing politics in front of non-Chinese

	M
Male	4.47
Female	3.62
Master of Arts	4.19
Master of Science	3.97

Discussion

Are Chinese students willing to discuss politics in front of non-Chinese?

It is indicated by the results that politics seems to be a taboo area for Chinese students in intercultural communication, which is in line with the research of Hail (2015) that took Chinese students studying in the United States as the research object. The main reason for this tendency could be the group affiliation shaped by the external environment. According to the Duszak (2002), group affiliation is situational, which means the group affiliation of the individual might vary according to the change of living environment. Social identity is defined as one's affiliation with a specific group, and the core of social identity theory relates the personal identity of the individual to the social categories they belong to, such as nation, gender or ethnicity (Spears 2011). The research of Dolby (2004) examined the change of social identity among Chinese students when they first came to host countries and found that their identity change from personal identity to global identity, which means their identity changed from how they perceived their relationship with their home country to how they viewed themselves in relation with the world. In other words, the social identity of Chinese students shifted from the majority group to minority group in the society, which made them realise their own group identity. Several social psychologists such as Ting-Toomeya et al (2000) and Umaña-Taylor (2004)

pointed out that members from minority groups tend to attach greater importance to their group identity than those from majority groups. The attachment to the group among Chinese students encourages them to maintain a positive group impression in front of non-Chinese (Goffman 2008). That is the reason for the fact that many participants belong to the blind patriotism exacerbated by their external environment. Blind patriotism reduces the tolerance of Chinese students towards criticism of their own country (Schatz et al. 1997), together with the political struggle function of the media, which means media content from different countries interprets politics issue on the behalf of different interest classes (McChesney 2008). It is widely accepted that media is the main channel via which citizen learn about political events, so different attitudes in intercultural communication explain why Chinese students prefer not to discuss politics in front of non-Chinese.

Besides, the reason for patriotism is also closely related to the education that Chinese students receive. Besides media, literature, film or education also have the function of shaping the political opinion among citizens (Vickers 2008). In the education system of China, from primary schools to universities, patriotic education is compulsory, and the main reason for this phenomenon comes from the concerted Patriotic Education Campaign launched from 1991 (Wang 2008). Vickers (2008) analysed the content of patriotism education in China and found that instead of solely shaping their political views, it constructs the sense of pride in one's Chinese identity, reducing the tolerance for criticism of their own country. In addition, the national pride of individual constitutes their blind patriotism or constructive patriotism, which strengthens their emotional attachment to their country, according to Schatz, Staub and Lavine (1997). From what has been discussed above, the change of social identity and the education they received enhance the blind patriotism of Chinese students studying aboard and explain the reason why they prefer not to discuss politics in front of non-Chinese.

What are the reasons for the unwillingness of Chinese students to discuss politics in front of non-Chinese?

According to the result of correlation analysis, the preference of not discussing politics in front of non-Chinese correlate significantly with the purpose of achieving inner group harmony, instead of maintaining a positive relationship with their foreign counterparts, which is contradictory to the research of Hail (2015). To be more specific, when discussing controversial Chinese issues in front of non-Chinese, maintaining a harmonious relationship with their foreign counterparts is not just as important as showing loyalty to their country. On the one hand, from the perspective of Chinese communicators, showing their loyalty to their own country is important in intercultural communication, and the main reason for this tendency could be explained as follow. Firstly, influenced by the Confucius culture emphasising internal harmony, Chinese communicators believe that they need to be consistent in their opinions in front of non-Chinese, so they prefer not to cover those controversial political issues in intercultural communication (Zhou et al.2005). Apart from this, Chinese students' sense of belonging might be strengthened when they are aware of their group identity after going aboard (Gu & Schweisfurth 2015). When they are being labelled as Chinese, the group identity represents their personal identity to some extent (Jibreel 2015), which explains why many Chinese students feel uncomfortable when hearing comments of splitting their country.

Nonetheless, no firm evidence demonstrates that Chinese students consider politics as a taboo area in intercultural communication because they feel it is important to maintain a harmonious relationship with the outer group. The main reason derives from the commitment to their home country, as the patriotic education Chinese students receive shapes not only the sense of pride in their Chinese identity but also the sense of commitment to their country, which means they tend to defend their country in front of non-Chinese out of

the sense of responsibility of being a Chinese citizen (Vickers 2008). In other words, when controversial Chinese issues are covered in intercultural communication, they might choose to stand out to defend the political or economic interest of their home country instead of keeping silent to avoid the conflict of ideas. Consequently, the main reason for Chinese students to consider politics as a taboo area in intercultural communication is to maintain inner group harmonious in front of non-Chinese.

What social factors influence the willingness of Chinese students to discuss politics in front of non-Chinese?

Other social factors such as gender or major of participants also influence their willingness to discuss politics in the intercultural communication according to the result of regression analysis, which is not covered in the research of Hail (2015). On the one hand, males tend to be less willing than women to discuss politics in intercultural communication, which is in consistency with the findings of Robert (1997) Neuliep, Chaudoir and McCroskey (2001), Eisenberg (2005) that men tend to be more patriotic than women. The main reason for this is explained here in below. Green et al (2011) related the degree of patriotism to the role individual plays in the society. Within a country, those who are in power or control the majority of social resources are more likely to be aware of their national identity and establish stronger emotional attachment with their home country (Berman & Phillips 2000), which means those who are in dominance might be more patriotic. In recent years, men still dominate in most developing countries including China, even though the status of women in society has improved significantly due to feminist movement (Grown et al. 2005). As a result, male Chinese students are less willing to involve political topics in intercultural communication than female Chinese students.

Besides, the major of participants also exerts its influence on the willingness of Chinese students to discuss politics in front of non-Chinese, with the main reason being derived from the curriculum in the education system of China. In the second year of high school, Chinese students are divided into different classes according to science and arts (Xu & Ma 2015). While politics is one of the required subjects in the college entrance examination for liberal arts students, science students are not required to take this examination (Davey et al. 2007). As is mentioned earlier, the patriotic education involving politics classes can shape the political view of citizens (Vickers 2008). Therefore, influenced by their educational background, Chinese students studying for Master of arts are less tolerant of criticism towards their country than their counterparts studying for Master of science, which play a role in their unwillingness to cover politics topics in intercultural communication.

Implication and Limitations

Generally speaking, this study sheds light on the future study about the reason why Chinese students consider politics as a taboo area in intercultural communication. Firstly, the survey, with the ability to collect large amounts of data in a short time, is appropriate to test certain social phenomenon as it is an efficient way to measure the central tendency among participants. In addition, for those topics which are sensitive to be covered in the research, anonymous survey is an alternative means of ensuring the validity of data. Limitations also exist in this study, however, and the academic gap left in this study needs further study to fill in. On the one hand, this study solely chooses questionnaires as the way for data collection, so the angle of participants to answer the questions is limited, and further interview should be included to investigate other specific reasons for the unwillingness of Chinese students to discuss politics in front of non-Chinese. Another shortcoming of this study is the selection criteria of samples. While restricting samples to postgraduate students might reduce

the complexity, it is not completely suitable to let postgraduate students represent all Chinese students at Newcastle University UK, since the possible impact of the participants' education level received in China is ignored.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Chinese students consider politics as a taboo area in intercultural communication, which is in line with the research of Hail (2015). Differing from the research of Hail (2015), however, this research attributes the unwillingness to the idea of maintaining inner group harmony in front of non-Chinese instead of maintaining a positive relationship with them. The motivation of showing inner group harmony comes from the group identity shaped by a foreign environment and the education they have received. In the meantime, other social factors are also taken into consideration, and independent variables such as gender or the major of participants might also influence the attitude of Chinese students towards discussing politics in front of non-Chinese.

Despite the academic gap left which needs further study to fill, this study has reinforced the idea that Chinese students tend to consider politics as a taboo area in front of non-Chinese. Besides, generally speaking, this study also contributes to the research of sociolinguistic issues in the Chinese context, especially in terms of culturally specific taboo.

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Appendix A

Section A: Demographic information

1. what gender do you identity?

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

2. Where do you live in China for a long time?

- The north of China
- The south of China

3. What is your master's degree?

- Master of arts (MA)
- Master of science (MSc, MS)
- Master of Research (MRes)

4. How long have you been in the UK?

- Less than a year
- One to two years
- Two to five years
- More than five years

Appendix B

Section B: Evaluation of group affiliation

Q5-Q11 On the scale 1-5, in your opinion, to what extent do you agree with the following statement

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Indifferent	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree
Q5: I support Chinese policies for the very reason that they are the policies of my countries.					
Q6: I support Chinese policies because I believe they are almost always the morally correct ones.					
Q7: I oppose some Chinese policies because I care about my country and want to improve it.					
Q8: Even if another country disagrees with Chinese policies that I knew little about, I would definitely support my country's position.					

<p>Q9: If another country disagrees with Chinese policies that I knew little about, I would not necessarily support my country' s position.</p>					
<p>Q10: Even if I understand there might exist potential drawbacks of Chinese policies. I would support my country' s position in front of non-Chinese.</p>					
<p>Q11: If I understand there might exist potential drawbacks of Chinese policies, I would not necessarily support my country' s position in front of non-Chinese.</p>					

Appendix C

Section C: Evaluation of “SLHU” framework

Q14-Q21 On the scale 1-5, in your opinion, to what extent do you agree with the following statement

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Indifferen t	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree
Q14: I feel uncomfortable when I hear negative comments about my country from non-Chinese.					
Q15: I find it understandable when I hear negative comments about my country from non-Chinese.					
Q16: I am uncomfortable with the way non-Chinese comment on China.					
Q17: I am uncomfortable with the content of non-Chinese comments on China.					
Q18: I feel uncomfortable when I hear things like "Tibet does not belong to China"					
Q19: It is my duty as a Chinese to state China's position on Tibetan sovereignty in front of non-Chinese					
Q20: In front of non-Chinese, I would choose to remain silent on the issue of Tibetan sovereignty in order to avoid conflict of views					

Q21: When Han Chinese and Tibetans argue over Tibetan sovereignty in front of non-Chinese, I think both sides are at fault					
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Appendix D

The Spread-sheet of the Questionnaire Responses

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15	Q16	Q17	Q18	Q19	Q20	Q21	
1	2	1	1	2	4	3	2	4	4	4	4	5	5	4	4	4	4	5	4	4	3	
2	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	4	4	4	3	5	4	4	3	3	3	
3	2	2	1	2	4	3	2	4	4	5	1	5	3	5	3	5	5	5	5	3	3	
4	2	2	1	2	4	4	3	4	4	3	3	3	3	4	2	4	4	5	3	4	2	
5	2	2	1	1	2	3	2	2	3	4	3	3	3	5	2	4	4	4	4	4	5	
6	2	2	2	1	4	4	3	4	3	4	3	4	3	4	3	3	3	4	4	3	3	
7	2	1	2	2	3	4	2	2	4	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	4	4	4	2	3	
8	2	1	1	3	4	4	3	4	4	5	4	4	4	5	5	5	1	5	5	1	3	
9	2	2	2	2	3	3	2	4	1	3	2	4	4	3	2	3	4	4	4	4	4	
10	2	2	1	1	3	3	2	3	4	4	3	3	3	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	
11	1	2	1	2	3	3	2	4	4	2	2	5	4	4	3	3	3	4	2	4	4	
12	2	2	1	1	4	3	3	4	2	2	2	2	2	4	2	3	3	4	3	3	4	
13	2	1	1	2	3	2	3	5	4	4	3	4	3	5	3	4	4	5	5	2	3	
14	1	2	2	2	4	5	3	4	4	4	4	5	5	4	5	4	4	5	4	2	4	
15	1	1	2	2	5	5	4	5	4	4	4	5	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	2	4	
16	2	2	1	1	4	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	3	4	3	3	4	5	5	2	2	
17	2	2	2	1	5	3	4	5	4	5	4	3	3	5	4	5	4	5	5	1	1	
18	1	2	2	1	3	4	3	3	4	3	3	2	3	2	4	4	3	4	2	3	3	
19	1	2	2	1	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	3	2	4	2	3	5	4	4	2	3	
20	1	1	2	2	5	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	2	3	
21	2	1	2	2	5	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	4	5	5	4	2	4	
22	1	2	2	2	4	5	3	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	1	4	4	5	5	5	4	
23	2	2	2	2	5	4	3	5	3	3	3	3	3	5	3	3	3	5	5	5	3	
24	1	2	4	2	4	4	4	3	2	4	4	3	2	5	4	2	2	5	5	1	1	
25	2	2	2	2	1	4	4	3	4	3	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	5	3	4	3	
26	2	2	2	1	2	5	4	2	3	4	4	2	4	2	4	2	3	3	5	5	2	3
27	1	1	1	2	4	3	3	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	4	3	3	4	3	
28	2	2	2	1	1	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	
29	2	2	1	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	2	2	4	4	2	2	4	4	4	3	4	2
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31	1	1	1	2	4	4	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	4	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	
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37	1	1	2	2	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	2	4	4	4	4	1	4	
38	1	2	2	2	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	4	5	4	1	4	4	1	4	

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6	2	2	2	2	3	4	4	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	2	4	4	4	5	4	3	
6	1	1	1	2	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	5	1	4
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6	1	1	1	2	5	4	4	4	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	4	4	1	5
6	1	1	1	2	5	4	4	5	4	5	4	4	5	4	5	4	4	4	4	4	1	5

*When conducting reliability analysis, Q7,Q9, Q11,Q13,Q15 needs to be scored backwards