Article

The Silent Language of Connection: Nonverbal Rituals in Intercultural Friendships at a Chinese University

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how international and Chinese students at a Chinese university form intercultural friendships through nonverbal rituals, including silence, gift-giving, and shared meals. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, the study draws on 50 interviews, six focus groups, and 120 hours of observation. The findings reveal that silence serves to manage emotions and maintain face, gift-giving acts as a nonverbal apology and connector, and shared meals create hybrid cultural spaces for mutual understanding. These nonverbal practices enable students to develop trust and resolve conflicts without relying on language. The study contributes to the development of intercultural competence by extending symbolic interactionism to encompass nonverbal communication and reinterpreting face negotiation theory through the lens of embodied interaction. The research introduces the concept of "third culture building," suggesting that student-driven rituals are essential for fostering inclusive environments in higher education. The findings highlight the importance of informal interactions in cultivating intercultural relationships.

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INTRODUCTION

As globalization increases cross-border student mobility, intercultural competence has become a vital skill in international higher education, particularly in host countries such as China, where international student enrollment continues to grow and adapt to diverse motivations (Dai et al., 2023). The need to adjust to different cultures' communicative behaviors, both spoken and unspoken, increases as students and educators from diverse cultural backgrounds come together. In Chinese higher education, specifically, both educators and students face complex challenges and opportunities in implementing intercultural education (Lu et al., 2024), a reality that is particularly noted among international students who navigate linguistic, cultural, and academic transitions (Dai et al., 2023). Much attention has been given to verbal expression and cultural understanding. This study examines how international students at a Chinese university engage in silent, nonverbal, and ritualistic forms of communication, contributing to the growing body of research on intercultural friendships in Chinese higher education (Tang & Zhang, 2023). Contributions are made to the literature concerning meaning-making and identity construction within cross-cultural and intercultural contexts.

Theoretical Frameworks

Symbolic interactionism

The Blumer (1969) school of symbolic interactionism sees interaction as a metaphorical process in which meaning is given to symbols, actions, and events in a social setting. Rather than being ascribed characteristics or cultural stereotypes, identity and communication are fluid, dynamic, and continually shaped through social interactions.

This study builds upon symbolic interactionism by expanding its scope to encompass nonverbal, embodied rituals. It focuses on how both Chinese and international students give meaning to certain shared practices, such as silence, cooking together, and gift-giving, and how these practices shape, negotiate, and transform identity and cultural understanding in real time.

Face Negotiation Theory

Facial negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1988) examines how self-image and self-imposed dignity, or 'face,' are managed during cross-cultural communication, with comparative studies revealing significant variations in facework strategies across cultural contexts (Oetzel et al., 2001). It focuses on verbal strategies for facework, such as avoidance, directness, or apology, which are dichotomized into individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

This study extends the theory by demonstrating how students utilize nonverbal silence and gift-giving to address face-saving and face-restoration needs indirectly and culturally appropriately. The findings offer a culturally grounded reinterpretation of the theory, demonstrating that facework is often conveyed through subtle, symbolic gestures rather than spoken words.

Third Culture Building

Third, culture building (Taras et al., 2023) explains how individuals from diverse backgrounds come together to synthesize a culture that transcends all of their original cultures. The culture that forms from sustained intercultural relationships can be observed through shared practices, symbols, or routines that develop over time.

In this study, the shared meals and routine behaviors of participants can be understood as forms of third culture creation. More specifically, the students, through purposive silence and shared time, begin to form new cultural behaviors that emerge from friendships rather than a single culture. These rituals that emerge from friendship culture illustrate a blend of trust, relational empathy, and meaning-making.

This is particularly true in the context of relationships with high-context cultures where much meaning, nuance, and subtext are embedded in silence, gestures, or shared rituals. For example, silence is generally interpreted as a disengaged, negative response in low-context cultures. In high-context cultures, however, silence may serve as a form of courtesy, deferential, and emotional self-control (Nakane, 2007; Hashmi & Waheed, 2020; Anderson, 2023; Peng et al., 2023). In addition, acts such as shared cooking, gift giving, and holiday celebrations involve inclusion, apology, and gratitude, embodying the role of ritual as a means of intercultural communication (Chistyakov & Chistyakova, 2020). Such rituals are vital in the context of a multicultural university, where students are confronted with language and emotional barriers that can hinder their academic progress.

This study seeks to address these gaps. It positions itself alongside the growing criticism of essentialist models while applying symbolic interactionism to nonverbal and ritual forms of interaction. It aligns with prior research, which

identifies key components of intercultural communication competence as relational, adaptive, and context-dependent (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). The study shows international students' lived experiences and how emotional resonance, cultural improvisation, and silent empathy forge intricate interdependence in formal friendships that intertwine cultures and, in ways that formal programming often misses, reaffirm that informal social engagement and relational engagement tend to shape the well-being and integration of international students (Ivanova et al., 2025).

Furthermore, this research responds to international educational initiatives, such as UNESCO's Global Citizenship Education (Target 4.7), which aims to stimulate inclusive and culturally appropriate pedagogy. It is internationally and nationally documented that there is a need for humanistic and emotionally intelligent systems of human intercultural support that acknowledge and honor all forms of student agency, including quiet and unvoiced symbols of their experiences. Recent scholarship, such as the work by Ivanova et al. (2025), which compared students in the United States and Japan, has noted that informal social engagement and relationship dynamics, beyond formal programming, significantly contribute to international students' sense of belonging and well-being. Similarly, in the exploration of the experiences of Chinese and Korean students, Lee (2025) captured experiences of immobility, remote education, and rampant racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, showcasing their resort to resilient coping, or emotional adaptation, under heavily constrained conditions that relationally and nonverbally tend to sustain intercultural attachment during vulnerable times.

Research Questions
1. How do international students use nonverbal practices, such as silence, rituals, and gift-giving, to manage cultural differences and maintain emotional well-being?
2. What communicative strategies emerge when language barriers or cultural norms limit verbal communication?
3. How can institutions better support these informal, embodied forms of intercultural learning?

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This qualitative study examines the phenomenon of nonverbal communication and ritual in the construction of intercultural friendships between Chinese and international students at Yangzhou University. The students were studied in their everyday contexts, and an interpretive paradigm was used to explore their meaning-making processes about the embodied, situated, and social dimensions of their interactions. Additionally, guided by symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), this approach assumes that cultures are shaped and reshaped through social interactions and are, therefore, fluid.

Triangulated designs enabled the researchers to collect rich contextual data from semistructured interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic immersion. These methods also help researchers understand how the rituals of shared meals and gift-giving, proxemic behavior, and even silence serve nonverbally to express emotions, negotiate culture, and co-construct identities.

Participants

Fifty students—25 Chinese and 25 international—were recruited via purposive sampling. The experiences of this group reflect broader patterns in the motivations and adaptation processes of international students in China (Dai et al., 2023). The participants were from 12 Chinese provinces and represented 18 different nationalities, ensuring diverse cultural backgrounds and fostering meaningful participation in intercultural relationships.

To analyze the cultural styles of communication, Hall's (1976) high- and low-context culture framework was applied to form groups, supported by Hofstede's cultural dimensions model as a general reference point (Lin & Lou, 2024). All 25 Chinese participants were placed in the high-context communicator group. Among the international students, 14 were from high-context countries (India, Nigeria, Thailand), and 11 were from low-context countries (the United States, Russia, and England). While such frameworks provide a helpful starting point for grouping, it is essential to acknowledge critiques of Hofstede's model, which caution against treating cultural categories as fixed or overly deterministic (McSweeney, 2002). In this study, the classifications were applied flexibly, recognizing the diversity of communication practices within each cultural grouping. This approach proved helpful in explaining how silence, spatial practices, and gift-giving were interpreted and practiced.

Participants were recruited based on their active participation in intercultural friendships and willingness to reflect on nonverbal experiences. Data saturation was reached at 47 interviews, indicating that no new relevant themes emerged (Saunders et al., 2017).

Data collection

To ensure triangulation, three data sources were used:

1. Semistructured interviews (n = 50, 40–50 minutes each), conducted in Mandarin or English, explored participants' experiences with nonverbal strategies such as silence, proxemics, and rituals.
2. Focus group discussions (six sessions) of mixed-nationality groups examined how cultural assumptions and shared rituals shaped peer understanding. Students reflected on moments of miscommunication and how symbolic actions helped restore or deepen connections.
3. Ethnographic immersion over 120 hours of ethnographic observation in classrooms, dormitories, and dining areas allowed researchers to observe nonverbal behaviors, such as seating distance, eye contact, and gift exchanges, in natural settings.

Notes from the field, as well as interview transcripts, document date cues communicatively. For example, one Chinese participant remarked, *"We don't*

argue directly. We give each other space to cool off, then talk again later.""At first, we kept distance in the dorm kitchen, but after several nights cooking together, we were standing much closer without realizing it," a Russian student remarked. These reflections illustrate how silent empathy, alongside physical distance, serves as an effective way to manage the interplay between intimacy, conflict, and face-saving concerns.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed via Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis. For immersion, transcripts and field notes to be categorized were first scanned. During open coding, semantic codes (e.g., "gift as apology," "emotional withdrawal through silence") alongside latent codes (e.g., "ritual as emotional regulation," "physical proximity as trust-building") were established.

The initial codes were grouped into broader themes:

- Ritualized silence as facework
- Gift-giving as nonverbal apology
- Third culture creation through shared meals

To ensure analytic rigor, two trained coders independently analyzed 30% of the data via NVivo, achieving a Krippendorff's alpha of .81, indicating high reliability.

In addition to transcripts, more than 120 hours of ethnographic observation were recorded as detailed field notes. These notes captured contextually relevant information, proxemic movements, and modalities of interaction among students in informal settings such as kitchens, dormitories, and cafeterias. These fieldnotes were integrated into higher-level memos and coded together with interview and focus group data to facilitate insight triangulation.

To validate interpretations, 12 participants carried out member checking, actively confirming predefined themes and interpretations. Bias mitigation and credibility enhancement in the analysis were achieved through peer debriefing and reflexive journaling.

The study received IRB approval from Yangzhou University (DH24006). All participants signed informed consent forms and were assured anonymity through the use of pseudonyms.

Theoretical Alignment

The research design aligns with three key frameworks. First, symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) shaped the emphasis on everyday meaning-making and the coconstruction of identity. Second, face negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1988) involves the analysis of nonverbal face-saving strategies, such as silence and avoidance. Finally, the notion of third culture building (Taras et al., 2023) was used to interpret how hybrid rituals emerged through shared cooking and peer traditions. The study thereby contributes a culturally grounded extension of these theories by integrating embodied, nonverbal dimensions of interaction.

FINDINGS

The analysis revealed three key themes that explain how students use nonverbal communication and ritual practices to build and sustain intercultural friendships: (1) silence as emotional and relational regulation, (2) gift-giving as nonverbal apology and care, and (3) shared meals and the emergence of a third culture. These themes reflect how students cocreate meaning, manage conflict, and express affiliation beyond language, particularly in high-context intercultural settings.

Silence as Emotional and Relational Regulation

Silence often emerges as a powerful tool of communication. Rather than the default stereotype of silence as a form of avoidance, participants articulated silence as a culturally appropriate strategy to cope with emotional labor and relationship equilibrium, as articulated in previous studies about the significance of nonverbal communication in high-context cultures (Hashmi & Waheed, 2020).

A Chinese participant noted:

"When we are upset, we do not argue. We become quiet. It gives space. This is our way of showing care."

Silence as a strategy aids students in managing face issues, especially in the initial stage of a friendship characterized by verbal disputes. During this phase, it is best to refrain from uttering anything that is potentially awkward, a breach, or misjudged.

A Moroccan student similarly described silence as a form of emotional reset. This student noted that a short period of silence enabled the restoration of friendship postdisagreement.

These are examples of how silence serves as an affective pause, in this case, honoring, taking time, and reconnection.

Gift-Giving as Nonverbal Apology and Care

The act of gift-giving can function as an unspoken yet complex form of apology or emotional disclosure. As the students illustrated, some of the relationship-restoring and appreciating tensions were resolved through small snacks and drinks and even through more culturally significant items.

One Indonesian participant recalled:

"My Chinese friend never said sorry, but after our disagreement, she placed a juice bottle on my desk the next day. That was her way. I smiled, and we were good."

Another participant described receiving a small gift during a troubling period, which silently conveyed support and affection.

In many of these instances, the students described moments that were significant in the development of intercultural relationships and that deepened

their conversations or physical intimacy. Throughout the described moments, empathy was inherent in the acts of gift-giving, intertwined with the act itself.

Shared Meals and the Emergence of a Third Culture

The practice of cooking and eating together has been established as the basis of intercultural friendship development, which is consistent with prior work showing that ritual activities can function as powerful tools of intercultural communication (Chistyakov & Chistyakova, 2020). Preparing food offered a means of communicating concern, navigating cultural complexities, and cultivating blended customs, which has been termed a "third culture" of shared significance.

One Nigerian participant described:

"After a classroom conflict, we prepared rice and dumplings. As we cooked, we began to reset and laughed a lot. The food helped us to overlook our previous frustration."

In the latter instances, the participants reported a shift from distant body language to unspoken physical proximity: passing utensils, volunteering to share space at the stove, or sitting closely together during late-night meals. These embodied changes indicated the development of trust and shared understanding.

A Chinese participant noted the gradual reduction in interpersonal proximity that accompanied shared cooking, observing that this led to a relaxed sense of ease and physical intimacy between roommates.

Over time, these patterns solidified friendships, serving as symbolic anchors that replaced verbal check-ins or problem-solving conversations.

Together, the three themes underscore students' nonverbal actions as forms of interaction that supplement speech and as forms of intercultural engagement. Other relatively nonverbal means of communication, such as silence, gifts, and meals, may serve as apologies, inclusion, or emotional attunement. These results strongly suggest that an approach that considers ritual and embodiment is crucial in developing intercultural competence, particularly where there is a linguistic, cultural, or emotional gap.

DISCUSSION

Broader Relevance of Findings

This study is located at a Chinese university. However, it has particular implications for the multicultural context of global higher education, where nonverbal communication, emotional negotiation, and ritual in the formation of intercultural friendships are important, supporting the idea that greater international engagement from students fosters a sense of belonging and decreases feelings of isolation (Ivanova et al., 2025).

In response to RQ1, which investigated the ways in which international students utilize nonverbal skills to navigate cultural contrasts and maintain emotional well-being, the study revealed that students employed silence, gift-

giving, and shared meals as means to care for and manage conflict beyond verbal expressions.

This study examined the practices of nonverbal rituals, including silence, gift exchange, and shared meals, among international and Chinese students to foster and maintain cross-cultural friendships within the context of a Chinese university. The findings indicated that nonverbal communication is fundamental and critical to the development of intercultural competence, particularly in high-context cultures.

Reframing Nonverbal Rituals as Intercultural Competence

These results contribute to current scholarship in three key ways: (1) expanding symbolic interactionism to include embodied rituals, (2) reinterpreting face negotiation theory through nonverbal strategies, and (3) illustrating how students collaboratively build "third cultures" that transcend national or linguistic boundaries, resonating with earlier findings on the adaptability and relational focus central to intercultural communication competence (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005).

Traditionally, silence has been viewed as an obstruction in intercultural communication, usually interpreted as an indicator of discomfort or misinterpretation (Nakane, 2007). This also answers RQ2 by demonstrating how communicative strategies develop in contexts where culture or speech norms restrict verbal communication. The participants in this study, however, deliberately used silence as a means to regulate, prevent conflict escalation, and maintain emotional dignity, supporting research that identifies nonverbal communication as a mediator of intercultural understanding in educational contexts (Anderson, 2023). These perspectives transform silence from a perceived void of communication into a culturally framed strategy brimming with meaning.

Similarly, the rituals of giving gifts and sharing food transcended superficial social customs; instead, they were performatively rich gestures that served as apologies, invitations, and trust affirmations, demonstrating advanced nonverbal literacy that transcended and connected disparate cultures and languages.

Extending and Reinterpreting Theoretical Frameworks

While symbolic interactionism has focused on meaning-making through the use of language and other symbols (Blumer, 1969), this study shows that meaning is also made through ritual, rhythm, and gestures. Certain nonverbal practices, such as cooking in groups or offering a gift in silence, were ways of sharing understanding and communicating appreciation that were culturally intelligible.

These actions illustrate the intercultural competence described by Deardorff (2006), expanded by Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith (2022), and further supported by Arasaratnam & Doerfel (2005) as context-bound, relational, and shaped by adaptive communicative behaviors. The students did not complete a checklist of learned behaviors; they improvised and crafted new norms through interactions. Their friendships were not formed through institutional programming; instead, they were formed through daily acts of embodiment that resonated with them.

Third Culture Building and Institutional Support

Traditional face negotiation theory, as outlined by Ting-Toomey (1988), focuses on verbal strategies such as directness, avoidance, and apologizing. This theory is extended by showing how nonverbal actions, particularly silence and gift-giving, function as subtle facework, echoing recent findings on how Chinese students manage collective face concerns in response to criticism (Zhu & Bresnahan, 2024). Students' silence, as a form of nonverbal apology or tension release, and gift-giving, as a nonverbal expression of apology, help manage a culturally appropriate relational identity.

This nonverbal focus draws attention to the need for alternate models of competence, which include emotional self-regulation and movement as central to the intercultural dimension.

The common motif of shared meals highlights how students participated in the formation of a third culture. In this instance, people collectively create a blended cultural region (Taras et al., 2023) and engage in ritualized acts that facilitate intercultural understanding (Chistyakov & Chistyakova, 2020). Shared cooking and eating rituals enabled the students to suspend their cultural defaults and engage in behaviors that were not exclusively owned by the group but also offered by the relationship.

The emergent third culture did not remain unchanged during its formation process. It was continuously reshaped through the ongoing interactions of individuals. These shared rituals fostered trust and the ability to heal emotionally. Most notably, these rituals demonstrated how intercultural competence is practiced outside of formal workshops and classrooms, in kitchens, in dorms, and around dining tables, complementing institutional strategies such as culturally responsive advice for international students (Liu & Renn, 2024).

These observations contribute to RQ3 because they uncover how institutions may facilitate informal, bodily forms of intercultural learning through nurturing and acknowledging student-led ritual frameworks.

Implications for Global Higher Education

These findings have practical implications for universities aiming to promote intercultural engagement:

Recognizing informal practices: Institutions should acknowledge that much intercultural learning occurs outside formal structures. Programming should create opportunities that support peer-led, informal, and ritual-based engagement, such as communal cooking nights or peer-sharing circles. At the same time, culturally responsive formal advising approaches can work in tandem with these informal practices to enhance students' integration, sense of belonging, and intercultural competence (Liu & Renn, 2024).

Expanding training models: Intercultural competence training should incorporate nonverbal communication and emotional literacy, aligning with culturally responsive advising practices that recognize students' diverse

backgrounds and needs (Liu & Renn, 2024). This includes understanding the communicative role of silence, body language, and rituals across cultures.

Space for cocreation: Policies and programs should facilitate rather than dictate cultural exchange, allowing students to build third cultures through lived experience rather than top-down definitions.

A practical insight for global organizations is that the phenomenon of ritual nonverbal communication is transcultural. In the context of African higher education, shared meals and spiritual or cultural rituals can foster proactive, informal intercultural integration. Nonetheless, these rituals are not typically viewed from a programming perspective. In Western education systems, silence is often misinterpreted as a lack of engagement. However, students from high-context cultures may use silence as a way to express respect, emotional control, or self-soothing. Academic staff have the option of reframing silence as a meaningful cultural practice and, in doing so, are more likely to avoid mislabeling or misjudging students' behavior. In multicultural online classrooms, emergent nonverbal forms include the use of emojis, silent pauses before answering, group celebrations in virtual spaces, and sharing and togetherness, which serve to build trust and rapport. In addition, research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international students has shown that when mobility is limited, students make efforts to engage in small, cultural, and relational contexts as a way of maintaining emotional connection, highlighting the importance of such nonverbal engagement, even during crises (Lee, 2025).

To help practitioners apply these findings, this study proposes the following summary framework for understanding how nonverbal rituals support intercultural friendships:

Nonverbal Practice	Function	Example from Data	Generalized Application
Silence	Emotional regulation, face-saving	Students withdrew silently after conflict	Normalize silence as reflective space in advising
Gift-Giving	Apology, care, inclusion	Juice given in place of verbal apology	Encourage symbolic peer-to-peer gestures
Shared Meals	Trust-building, third culture creation	Cooking rice and dumplings postargument	Implement communal cooking events in dorm settings

These insights also support broader agendas, such as UNESCO's Global Citizenship Education (Target 4.7), which promotes inclusive, human-centered educational spaces. By centering on student agency and embodied interaction, institutions can foster environments where emotional well-being, cultural curiosity, and mutual understanding flourish.

Acknowledgment

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