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Silence in Intercultural Collaboration: A Sino-Dutch Research Centre

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Abstract

China is widely recognized as a significant scientific partner for Western universities. Given that many Western universities are now operating in the Chinese context, this study investigates the everyday conversations in which international partnerships are collaboratively developed and implemented. In particular, it draws attention to the interpretations of the meanings attached to silence in these conversations, and how these can have unintended consequences for how these joint partnerships are accomplished. The findings come from an ethnographic case study that investigated collaboration within the context of setting up a Sino-Dutch research centre between the Delft University of Technology (TU Delft) and South China University of Technology (SCUT) as experienced by Dutch researchers in their interaction with their Chinese partners. The findings reveal that the Dutch researchers attached meaning to what was not said by the Chinese, interpreting it as lack of communication, resulting in judgements, uncontested trusts, and distancing that negatively influenced the achievement of common goals. Finally, the relevance of the findings is discussed for those managing communication in international academic partnerships.

Keywords

Silence, Interdisciplinary Collaboration, Relationships, Institutional Partnerships, Academic, Culture

“In human intercourse the tragedy begins, not when there is misunderstanding about words, but when silence is not understood.”

—Henry David Thoreau

“Though talking face to face, their hearts are a thousand miles apart.”

—Chinese proverb

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, China has become a global leader in science and technology (Klotzbücher, 2014; Resnik & Zeng, 2011). China’s total R&D expenditure exceeds US\$ 163 billion; this is an increase of 18% within one year. Between 1998 and 2012, the number of students that graduated also increased steeply, from 830,000 to 6.2 million. In 2020, this number is expected to reach 10.5 million, almost a third of the world’s total students (Bound, Saunders, Wilsdon, & Adams, 2013); and China has over 1800 higher education institutions and universities (Fazackerley & Worthington, 2007).

China’s heightened visibility on the academic stage is widely noticed. Many European and US universities recognize China as an important academic partner and are encouraging various kinds of institutional collaboration with the country (Ennew & Fujia, 2009; Klotzbücher, 2014). These institutional partnerships generally take the form of joint research projects, collaborative research networks, branch campuses, or other kinds of large-scale projects, often under socially relevant themes such as healthcare, sustainable cities, and life sciences (Bruijn, Adriaans, Hooymans, Klasen, & Morley, 2012). Such partnerships offer opportunities to generate new research funding (Bound et al., 2013), access research facilities, attract potential PhD candidates and students, and gain a better international competitive position. Eye-catching examples of far-reaching collaboration are the opening of the University of Nottingham Ningbo, China, and Xi’an Jiaotong Liverpool University (Ennew & Fujia, 2009).

In contrast to typical international scientific efforts such as those directed towards co-publication, in which individual researchers collaborate, partnerships between academic institutions have a more strategic character and a higher degree of complexity. They require improved coordination and support of research and administrative, legal and regulatory requirements (Bruijn et al., 2012; Ennew & Fujia, 2009) and give rise to complex interactions between multiple scientists with different institutional and disciplinary backgrounds embedded in different cultural contexts (Klotzbücher, 2014). Although collaborating with foreign scientists is productive and exciting, the lack of intercultural competence is mentioned as an important reason why international initiatives do not produce the desired results (Cummings & Kiesler, 2005). Those collaborating with Chinese institutions have expressed specific challenges and frustrations (Li-Hua, 2007). Zhu, McKenna and Sun (2007) mention that Chinese negotiation behaviour is often found to be difficult and unintelligible. Herbig and Martin (1998) note that the Chinese approach of slowly building consensus for projects is often experienced as “maddening”, and Chua (2012) writes that many Westerners have a hard time understanding the habit of building “trust of the heart”. Despite previous literature suggesting that scholars should

further examine specific communication obstacles in collaborating with the Chinese, we know very little about the mechanisms that shape the course of intercultural interaction.

In this paper, we suggest that exploring how the meaning of silence is constructed and interpreted during intercultural interaction creates relevant avenues for understanding why collaborations develop as they do. Studies that consider collaboration pay attention mainly to spoken conversation, to what is exchanged verbally (Panteli & Fineman, 2005). Intercultural conversations, however, do not consist only of what is being said. From this paper's perspective, silence is regarded as indispensable for gaining a better understanding about the course of intercultural conversations; by failing to acknowledge these silences within the functioning of international collaboration, we overlook a significant aspect of what collaboration is about. Despite work on silence in organizations (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Panteli & Fineman, 2005), where it is strongly associated with a deterioration in organizational performance, silence is rarely investigated in the context of complex research collaboration (Verouden, van der Sanden, & Aarts, 2016). Hence, the present study explores the significances of silence in the context of international research collaboration between the Netherlands and China, concentrating on how silence is constructed and interpreted during interactions between individuals and groups of individual collaborators. The focus of this paper is on meaning, including the effect of these interpretations on the course of the collaboration. Two questions structure this analysis:

- 1) What specific meanings do the Dutch partners in the collaboration attach to moments of silence in conversations with their Chinese colleagues?
- 2) What is the effect of these interpretations on the course of the collaboration?

Deeper insight into these questions is urgently needed because of the current internationalizing academic context in which universities are increasingly seeking to build lasting overseas partnerships with emerging global academic powers like China. It can contribute to the ways in which the everyday, intercultural practice of international collaboration is academically understood, and provides practical guidance on how to build constructive future initiatives.

This paper is structured as follows. First, it reviews studies of intercultural silence, distinguishing between intra- and inter-cultural approaches. Second, the findings of an ethnographic case study of the building of a joint Sino-Dutch research centre as experienced by Dutch scientists in their interaction with their Chinese academic partners are discussed. The findings demonstrate how the Dutch scientists' interpretation of moments of silence during intercultural conversations shaped the development of collaborative partnerships in often unexpected ways. The conclusion discusses how the results of our study add to current research on international collaboration and provides practical suggestions for managing the interplay between silence and talk in international academic partnerships.

2. Conceptual Overview: The Significance of Silence and Culture

The starting point of this study is that silence is of vital significance in human communication. As many authors have argued, silence is not the absence of noise but part of communication, often as important as speech (Jaworski, 2005; Tannen, 1984). Communication scholars indicate that the meanings associated with silence are not universal in nature, but defined by the cultural context (Krieger, 2001; Sifianou, 1997). Basso (1970) wrote: “For a stranger entering an alien society, a knowledge of when not to speak may be as basic to the production of culturally acceptable behaviour as a knowledge of what to say” (p. 214). Furthermore, silences are not only rooted in their context, but are also part of a complex set of interpretations and interactions embedded in specific social interactions. The complexity of silence, Nakane (2007) explains, is amplified when one is investigating its meaning in intercultural encounters; this requires researchers to consider how varying norms and assumptions related to silence are interpreted. Hence, in analysing silence in intercultural communication, we distinguish between two approaches—one that understands silence as a cultural phenomenon, as part of distinctive cultural patterns and orientations, versus one that sees silence as embedded in the interaction between different cultures. We first discuss the intracultural approach, basing our discussion on the work of scholars who have theorized cross-cultural differences (Hall, 1959; Hofstede, 1991). In the subsequent section of this overview, we discuss its significance beyond specific cultural variations, explaining how the meaning of silence is open to interpretation, and how this can lead to judgements, stereotyping, and problems in intercultural communication (Basso, 1970; Nakane, 2007).

2.1. Intracultural Silence

First of all, a number of studies discuss the cultural meaning of silence from the perspective of high-context and low-context communication cultures, explaining how messages and meanings are conveyed in either a clear and unambiguous or implicit and subtle manner. Hall (1959) gives the following definition:

A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code (p. 36).

Because people from high-context communication cultures rely less on verbal codes than on information induced from context, silence is a valued means of communication. In high-context cultures, fewer words are used and messages are often conveyed through silence. Studies have demonstrated that, for instance, in Asian countries like China and Japan, silence is a valued and efficient form of communication, where it is used to convey various meanings such as

virtue, truthfulness, and respect. Lebra (1987) reported how the Japanese value indirect, implicit, subtle, and even non-verbal communication, trusting the listener's ability to guess what the person is inferring. This contrasts with studies of low-context cultures, like those of Germany, the USA, and the Netherlands, in which people are less comfortable with silence and do not accept that thoughts are implicit and discreet; they instead value direct and goal-directed communication (Bennett, 1993; Bruneau & Ishii, 1988). Although high-context cultures may find direct and open communication awkward, we cannot assume that all high-context cultures rely on silence. For instance, strong norms of hospitality in Middle Eastern or Latin American high-context cultures may encourage open communication about excitement, affection, and emotions.

The use of silence may seem more a characteristic of face cultures than of all high-context cultures. Face cultures are a specific type of high-context culture, in which the individual's sense of self-worth and self-image derive extrinsically from social interactions (Aslani, Ramirez-Marin, Semnani-Azad, Brett, & Tinsley, 2013). In face cultures, silence frequently fulfils a pragmatic function (Jaworski, 1989), where it is associated with the saving of face. Previous empirical studies reveal that face cultures typically avoid discussions that involve disagreement and negative emotions that could embarrass or hurt other people and harm group solidarity. A frequently cited face-saving strategy is the use of silence as politeness. Extending Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, Sifianou (1997) portrays silence as the ultimate act of politeness. She distinguishes between two types of politeness silence: positive politeness silence, which serves mutual interests and builds common ground between parties, and negative politeness silence, which is used to avoid imposition and safeguards personal territory, as when we stay silent to avoid requests, warnings, or advice.

Yum (1988) for instance discusses how the Japanese consider silence a very important communication, associated with politeness and accommodation of others' needs. In her study of international Chinese teaching assistants, Lemak (2012) also reports that, whereas the faculty expected open acknowledgment of doubt, lack of knowledge, and understanding, students "followed the Chinese cultural and linguistic practice of avoiding to speak up in a way that might cause the professor to think negatively of their ability. The use of silence and avoidance in formal contacts in the classroom was a polite deference and concern for maintaining appropriate face for unequal status interactions" (p. 497).

Third, the distinction between individualistic and collectivist cultures is related to the use of silence. Societies with a face culture typically have stable hierarchical social structures whose norms are based on collective interdependency (Aslani et al., 2013); they value harmony and interdependence rather than individualistic, outcome-oriented behaviour. This distinction can be recognized in the context of networking behaviour. In the West, networking is generally associated with individualism and highlights the commitment to personal tasks and projects (Luo, 1997; Ai, 2006). The individual transaction is seen as the most

important unit of exchange. In China, networking behaviour is governed by the concept of *guanxi* (Zhu et al., 2007), which is rooted in social and moral norms of Confucian philosophy and refers to the personal contacts or connections that define one's position in the social network. Unlike Western forms of networking, *guanxi* relationships do not draw a hard line between business and personal relationships (Chua, 2012; Herbig & Martin, 1998).

Silence is identified as an important part of the *guanxi* relationship. Relationships are often governed by an unspoken and unwritten code of reciprocity. Luo (1997) explains that *guanxi* is intangible and “established with overtones of unlimited exchange of favours and maintained in the long run by unspoken commitment to others in the web” (p. 45). Within this relational structure, less powerful members of society or institutions accept that power is unequally distributed and do not openly question this arrangement; they follow interaction rules such as speaking when one is permitted to speak. Hwang, Ang, & Francesco (2002) explain that this disposition towards hierarchy is linked to silence and shown in the strong Chinese norms regarding the temporal management of turn-taking in which the highest ranking person is allowed to speak first on behalf of the whole group, while the others remain silent. In this way, silence marks solidarity and hierarchical relationships between conversational partners, conveying information about people's positions in relationships, authority, and rank.

From this section we see that silence can have a variety of meanings in communication, depending on the specific cultural context (Nakane, 2007). The previous studies offer valuable insights, enabling us to understand silence through the lens of culture. However, when they are applied to dynamic, real-life situations, dichotomies between speaking and silence are often less clear. Hence, to understand the complexity of silence, intracultural studies of silence must be complemented with a perspective that takes into account its role in intercultural interaction. Nakane (2007) observes: “what is important for analysis of intercultural communication is not finding cultural differences to explain the participant's behaviour but understanding in what context and in what way participants modify or assert their cultural norms, or accommodate to the other party's cultural norms” (p. 34). Hence, the next section discusses silence in intercultural interaction, showing how different usages of silence are interpreted differently and how this can lead to judgements, stereotypes, and distancing.

2.2. Intercultural Silence

First of all, studies of silence in intercultural encounters have shown that differences in silence usage can be a great source of misinterpretation. Compared to verbal acts, the meaning of silence is much more open to interpretation (Poland & Pederson, 2006: p. 308). Jaworski (1993) notes that “silence is a cool medium of communication. It requires a high degree of participation and great involvement of the audience.... a listener has to invest more processing effort in maxi-

mizing the relevance of silence than of speech... [silence] requires more filling in, background information, and/or involvement” (p. 160). When people are not sufficiently familiar with one another and their customs or language, they infer from interaction what the other means by silence. This point is illustrated by [Fuji \(2004\)](#), who observed that Japanese managers exhibited more tolerance for silence than their US colleagues, who misinterpreted the Japanese silence in interaction as uncomfortable and frustrating. This misinterpretation is also a common feature of professionals where the verbal is a dominant mode of expression. [Krieger \(2001\)](#) gives the example of this inability to comprehend silence in the lawyering practice; he shows how lawyers interpret the silent or near-silent response of their clients in counselling as signifying agreement, even though they are still tentative about the specific offer.

Furthermore, when silence is misinterpreted, this can make people negatively evaluate each other’s conversational behaviour ([Nakane, 2007](#); [Spencer-Oatey & Xing, 2005](#); [Tannen, 1984](#)). Silence leads to all kinds of judgements about another’s character, motives, and personality. For example, [Wieland \(1991\)](#) shows how French participants judged Americans to be tedious talkers uninterested in contributing to the conversation, whereas the American participants felt that they could not “get a word in edgewise” and were offended that they were excluded from the conversation. [Jenkins \(2000\)](#) found that Chinese international teaching assistants kept silent as polite deference to maintain appropriate face in unequal status interactions with their American counterparts who correspondingly interpreted their silence as a “lack of motivation, isolationism, and unwillingness to cooperate” (p. 497). [Lemak \(2012\)](#) illustrates how students’ silences led to harsh character judgements, perceiving students as ungrateful and lacking respect and the desire for education. Students who used silence to be polite and considerate were rated as tedious conversation partners.

Negative judgements about silence can increase the distance between people. This happens when judgements about an individual’s character or personality become the basis for comparisons between communicative styles of distinct communities ([Nakane, 2007](#): p. 15). Those who use less talk think of the more talkative group as pushy, hypocritical, and untrustworthy ([Tannen, 1984](#)). [Scollon and Wong-Scollon \(1990\)](#) show how different expectations about how long someone should speak can be at the root of inter-ethnic conflict. Studying interactions between Native Americans and American English speakers, they revealed how differences with respect to silence led to negative stereotyping, in which English speakers viewed the reserved nature of Native Americans as uncooperative, and even stupid, whereas the Native Indians regarded English speakers as too talkative. Similarly, [Tannen’s \(1984\)](#) study of American communication norms demonstrated that talkative New Yorkers perceived slower Californian speakers as “withholding, uncooperative, and not forthcoming with conversational contributions” (p. 108), whereas the slow speakers perceived the faster speakers as dominating and pushy. In a broader sense, Nakane demonstrates

how conceptions of cultures as “talkative” or “silent” are integrated in broader, historically grown stereotypical notions such as the “Silent East” as opposed to the “Eloquent West” (Nakane, 2007). Polar opposites are created between entire continents on the basis of the meanings given to each other’s speaking and silence behaviour.

The major conclusion that can be drawn from these studies is that the different meanings associated with silence can lead to misunderstandings in communication, causing negative judgements, stereotyping, and distancing. Despite these valuable insights, empirical studies on the role of silence in intercultural settings are lacking (Jaworski, 2005). Nakane (2007) therefore notes the need for more comprehensive research into silence in intercultural encounters, especially in today’s global settings where intercultural communication difficulties are likely to arise.

The next section operationalizes the previous conceptual considerations by examining silence within an international academic collaboration setting, in which two large universities of technology from the Netherlands and China sought to build a Sino-Dutch research centre. Our study concentrates on how the Dutch researchers involved in this effort perceived, identified, and interpreted moments of silence during intercultural interaction with their Chinese partners.

3. Research Setting: Developing a Sino-Dutch Joint Research Centre

This paper uses the material from a case study of a cutting-edge bilateral Sino-Dutch joint research centre established by the Delft University of Technology (TU Delft) and the South China University of Technology (SCUT). The reason for establishing the centre and intensifying international relationship with China was to generate common knowledge on smart and sustainable urban systems and infrastructure development. China presently faces challenges of an unparalleled scale in this specific area. Cities are heavily polluted, burdened by gross economic and social inequality, stressed by planned and unplanned migration, and affected by political vicissitudes. The country has been investing heavily in smart and eco-cities (Bound et al., 2013), for example devoting roughly US\$ 10 billion to restructuring, energy-saving, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and environmental protection (Bruijn et al., 2012). Many of the country’s problems cannot be solved independently but require new approaches and solutions that can generate interdisciplinary knowledge on smart and sustainable urban systems and infrastructure development.

The centre aims to be a platform where both parties can conduct various types of academic exchange, joint research studies, joint education programmes, and joint application for projects by integrating their academic and research resources to build complementary advantages that can solve many of these global problems. The centre is meant to be an operational entity that coordinates and

implements the existing and future activities of international cooperation between the two universities. The centre is part of the international strategies of both universities and signifies the desire to deepen the international collaboration between both countries. The initial activities to build the centre were funded by donations from the two universities, which invested €125,000 yearly for three years.

Because of its broad interdisciplinary and international scope, the joint research centre offered an interesting case wherein to examine the significance of silence in an urgent, everyday intercultural setting. Setting up the centre comprised conceptually challenging interdisciplinary work, which required extensive discussions between scientists from diverse scientific disciplines and domains such as infrastructure, transport, architecture, policy and management, and civil engineering. Second, the collaboration posed specific relational difficulties. In contrast to many academic collaborations with China, in which previously established and existing bottom-up contacts between individual researchers are extended (Bruijn et al., 2012), whereby the existence of sufficient trust between parties is guaranteed (Klotzbücher, 2014), this centre was completely new and brought together Dutch and Chinese scientists who were not yet acquainted. For many of the participating scientists, it was their first time working with Chinese academics; this meant that they could not draw on previous experiences to shape the collaboration. In addition to the unfamiliarity of the interactional parties, the parties did not have a previous history of working with people from their own university. The members from civil engineering were added to the Dutch project group at the last moment. Put differently, it was a chance collaboration to launch a promising research project. Moreover, despite the complex intercultural character of the initiative, there were no external cultural mediators like Sinologists to support talk between participants. The scientists themselves were responsible for the course of the conversations. Given the complex intercultural dimension of the collaboration, the case study analyses how the Dutch scientists experienced and interpreted what the Chinese did not talk about and what they themselves did not say, and the consequences this had for shaping the course of conversations and the development of relationships.

4. Methods and Analysis

The role of silence in the collaboration process was studied through an ethnographic approach that explored in depth the conversations between participants, using a combination of field observations, casual conversations, and interviews (Moore, 2011). Observations were conducted at two three-day workshops in the Netherlands and China, providing first-hand data about the interactions of scientists and academics involved in developing and implementing the joint centre. The workshops were intended to deepen the research collaboration, involving a delegation of researchers from the participating schools of architecture, technology, policy and management, and civil engineering as well as supporting staff

members from the international offices responsible for coordination, communication, and administrative issues. They were coordinated and supervised by a council of directors from both universities, who were the basis of the party and consisted of leading professors from the respective schools. The council was responsible for the organization and implementation of the centre and for decisions regarding research such as assessing submitted bids and proposals. The first researcher participated in both bilateral workshops, which consisted of plenary meetings and several smaller roundtable meetings, and examined naturally recurring talk between researchers about the incorporation and development of research, educational, and valorisation activities within the centre.

In addition to the observations of official workshop interaction, the researcher participated in informal meetings and beyond-work activities such as lunches, dinners, and group excursions to observe participants' formal and informal communication behaviour. This was an important source of data because it gave us a chance to become acquainted with the participating scientists within the group and talk to many of them off-the-record. Casual conversations were held with a broad selection of informants during formal occasions such as workshops and meetings, but also during informal interactions like breaks, lunches, and dinners, and explored their experiences and recollections of discussions and conversations. Informants were constantly asked to reflect on Chinese communication behaviour, and to define how they perceived and interpreted this behaviour. It was not possible to tape-record these informal conversations because of the fleeting nature of these interactions, but the researcher registered information on the spot using note-taking methods (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

An additional 28 interviews were held with Dutch researchers who were well informed on the collaboration, such as the council of directors, members from the international office staff, and a selection of professors, senior scientists, and PhD students who participated in both workshops. In addition, we interviewed university policymakers and directors, asking them about the broader relevance of the bilateral centre for the university's internationalization strategy. Standardized open-ended interviews were used to structure the variation in the questions, exploring what people expected from conversations, how they experienced and understood the unfolding of conversations, and whether difficulties were discussed or not within inter- and intra-groups. The interviews usually lasted an hour, were tape-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Although we initially aimed to explore the perspective of both the Dutch and the Chinese actors involved in the collaboration, it appeared difficult to initiate conversations with the Chinese, who engaged in conversation with colleagues or attended to their regular academic work at the sparse free moments in between meetings. It also proved difficult to arrange interviews. In contrast to the interviews with the Dutch, interview appointments with the Chinese had to be formally arranged through the international office; this made it difficult because they had to give up their sparse time to take part in a research project. Even

though we interviewed the directors and staff of the international office and talked with several Chinese centre professors and researchers off-record, we could not collect enough in-depth material to give a full account of the Chinese experiences. For that reason, we have chosen to use the material relating to the Dutch scientists in this study, demonstrating in detail how these silences were interpreted by the Dutch, how this led to misinterpretation and attributions, and how this influenced the achievement of common collaborative goals.

The findings were analysed using ethnographic methods, paying special attention to the moments of silence in the qualitative data (Clarke, 2005). Observational reports and interview transcriptions were coded and categorized, using the topics selected in the preliminary research design. The analysis consisted of continually re-reading and triangulating data from different sources and material, searching for patterns, guided by the Dutch researchers' interpretation of silence. We focused our analysis on how they identified and attached meanings to the moments when the Chinese did not speak, how they explained and justified their interpretations, and whether they raised and clarified them during conversations. The data were intended to develop a deeper understanding of how the Dutch researchers experienced communication during the collaboration process, including many moments of silence, and to interpret these silence in various ways. The discussion of the findings is structured by looking at the interpretations of silence at three crucial junctures and how these shaped the course of the collaboration, the preliminary setting-up phase and two large matching events in the Netherlands and China.

5. Findings

5.1. Developing the Centre: The Preliminary Phase

The idea for the centre was developed and advanced by a small "China-minded" group of scientists from the Dutch university. Personal fascination with far-reaching technological developments in China was an important impetus for establishing contact, as one of the initiating professors explains in an interview:

"I have this enormous fascination with China. I do not find everything fantastic there. Of course, there are many bleak sides to development. However, if you are interested in new technologies, system concepts, and infrastructural governance models, China is an outrageous laboratory."

The project gained momentum when representatives from SCUT indicated interest in the bilateral centre. Initially, the two China-minded professors travelled abroad looking for support for their vision of a bilateral centre with a known university, but only when negotiations with the designated university failed did SCUT emerge as a prospective partner. As one informant stated, "the project was simply relocated, it was a coincidence." Once Chinese interest was awakened, an actual plan was needed that could be variously interpreted to match the interests of both sides. One of the Dutch initiators explains:

“Together with a staff member from our international office, I quickly drafted a conceptual plan for the centre. The other Dutch parties immediately approved of the plan. When we put up the idea for consideration with the Chinese at the level of their international office and vice president, they agreed immediately and involved the deans of the different schools, who didn’t seem to have a problem with it either. Nobody commented on our plan, although I expect that the identification with it was probably weaker on the Chinese side. We were rather flexible in defining the theme of green cities in order to make it broadly applicable.”

Once both parties expressed their commitment to develop the plan together, the professors from the Dutch policy faculty took the lead in giving concrete shape to the collaboration, involving representatives from the architecture and civil engineering faculties of their home university, and presenting a finalized plan to the Chinese. In this early stage, the Chinese thus had a relatively small part in developing the plan, as a Dutch supporting staff member recalled in an interview: “We developed and discussed the plan on our side and threw it over the wall... If I had to do it again, I would establish a lot more contact with the Chinese side.”

In this early phase, when the Dutch took the lead, everything was seen as particularly promising. However, when the process moved to the decision-making phase, communication was experienced as more tedious. The Dutch viewed the visit in terms of closing the deal, yet, when they arrived in China to discuss the specifics with multiple parties, the Chinese were described as less eager than in initial conversations. Several Dutch informants mentioned the silence surrounding the Chinese decision-making style at this stage, as a Netherlands-based Chinese postdoc researcher who joined the Dutch delegation to China to sign the contract reported:

“In China, we were introduced to most of the participating researchers for the first time. We did not yet know one another very well. At this time, it was also still unclear whether the centre would become a reality or not. Whereas the international office knew about the plans for the centre, most of the Chinese professors were being informed about it for the first time. Nobody had a clear view about what was going to happen. Starting the communication was left mainly to the Dutch; the Chinese didn’t say much at this stage.”

The staff member from the Dutch international office put it as follows:

“The decision-making process was extremely vague ... Perhaps it is the Chinese way, leaving the process open for a very long time and not informing you along the way. You could not make out whether they were keen or not. Then, on the last day, when all the dignitaries were present, they suddenly presented a proposal to invest seed money ... Before that, the process just lingered on ... It felt like a snowball rolling in all directions.”

A Dutch member of the policy board echoed this feeling of not being informed:

“At the very last moment, when we were already wandering around the campus for three days talking and discussing things internally, at the very last moment, we were finally told that they wanted to go through with it. Up until the very last moment you don’t have any indication of certainty, they just do not tell you.”

From the analysis above, we see that the Chinese way of communicating decisions with regard to the course of the collaboration was seen by the Dutch as involving many silences, which they interpreted as avoidance and the purposeful withholding of information relevant to the project. Although the Dutch found this behaviour unfathomable, leaving them in a state of puzzlement, at this stage it did compromise the process. Despite initial difficulties in the early phase, parties went on to sign the formal agreement in the presence of high-ranking officials from both institutions. With the formal and the financial support of both institutions guaranteed, the collaboration moved into the next phase, in which extensive academic exchange between researchers from the different participating faculties took priority.

5.2. The Workshop in the Netherlands

In this section, we look at the three-day matching event organized in Delft to introduce and acquaint researchers with one another, and to have them explore and develop joint research studies, joint training and education programmes, and knowledge valorisation and dissemination (advice, consultancy, and applied in-company research projects). Before the start of the event, Dutch informants emphasized the importance of making the discussion on the scientific meaning of smart city more concrete and of developing joint research projects:

“As the research centre is quite new ... we need to think about how to continue. What kind of research, who and how they will get involved. We are trying to speed up... hopefully the centre will become more concrete.”

This desire to speed up the process and build scientific capacity was reflected in the bottom-up design of the workshop, in which exploring the tangibility of scientific work and matching individual projects and researchers were the first priority. For this, the Dutch board members invited individual researchers from their groups to present their research, revealing how it related to the broader objective of the centre.

The actual workshop, however, deviated from what was expected, revealing a somewhat different picture. When the Chinese delegation arrived in Delft, it consisted merely of eight high-level representatives, among whom the vice president, deans, several influential professors, and staff from the international office. An international staff member explained, rather annoyed, that “this was not communicated by the Chinese beforehand.” This unfortunate mismatch in

the participants' status and seniority was reflected in the presentations given by both hosts and guests. Dutch presentations focused predominantly on highly specialized scientific areas of expertise, clarifying narrow research topics such as scientific progress in roof constructions and sustainable and durable concrete with PowerPoint slides, frequently without connecting its relevance to the centre's broader research profile. One of the architecture board members commented on how the scientists from his school had failed to align their presentations to the Chinese context and social issues:

“They immediately showed some incredibly complicated, technical diagram, with 20 concepts that nobody knows outside their very specialized fields... surely they could have orientated it more to the idea that we're trying to build collaboration... See, I'm really cross about this. I was cross with our own people. I haven't said very much about it.”

Whereas the Dutch presentations were devoted to discussing specific research areas, those of the Chinese stood out for their formality, mainly articulating their desire to create a firmer basis and cultivate relationships, including many polite words in their talks, continuously stressing that TU Delft enjoyed an excellent reputation in China. In their presentations, some of the Chinese were not very fluent in English, and, because there was no translator present, could hardly be understood. When someone from the predominantly Dutch audience asked a question or commented on the topic of their presentations, asking them to explicate how they thought that concrete, individual projects could be realized, the Chinese steered away with polite sentences, emphasizing the value of bilateral relationships and collaboration.

During smaller, more informal faculty-to-faculty meetings, the Chinese communication behaviour was perceived as including even more awkward silences. These specific meetings were organized very informally to encourage the exchange of ideas between researchers. The Dutch adopted a casual and talkative attitude, immediately going into their research in depth. One of the invited Dutch policy scientists spoke uninterruptedly for 35 minutes about the quantitative analysis of public policy, a highly specialized topic. The presenters were clearly expecting comments or replies on their work (one invited feedback at the end of his presentation with: “You can now ask stupid questions”), but the Chinese barely said anything in return, merely smiling and nodding politely. The most senior Chinese commented that the scientific approaches were “very interesting and relevant to the Chinese context”; this was followed by a prolonged period of silence. Clearly uncomfortable, the Dutch researchers responded by filling the silence, explaining additional facets of their research work. Moreover, when the Chinese were given the opportunity to say something, they had not prepared a presentation of their own, and this caused a commotion.

Although nobody openly complained (at the closing ceremony it was even emphasized “how extremely interesting the sessions had been”), the Chinese

conversational behaviour was the subject of informal discussion within the Dutch “we-group”. During the lunch break after the opening ceremony, people were talking about the “long and tedious opening presentations of the Chinese,” in which “everything except scientific projects was discussed.” One of the architecture researchers told us that she did not understand why the Chinese only talked about the reputation of their university and were silent on the subject of prospective projects, stating that it “felt like they were staging one big performance.” With regard to the smaller meetings, informants mentioned being surprised that the Chinese did not contribute more to the discussions and generally found the “prolonged silences after presentations uncomfortable.”

In a broader sense, the perceived lack of communication was associated with Chinese intention and character. Dutch irritation was for instance aroused by the fact that the Chinese had not prepared presentations for the smaller session. A researcher criticized them, saying that “they did not even have paper handy to write down comments or questions,” taking this as an instance of Chinese indolence. One of the scientists, who was invited to present her work at the smaller meeting, mentioned that she found the lack of response to her research offensive, that it “signalled a lack of appreciation for her work.” Some people were also concerned that the perceived lack of input into conversations would affect the partnership undesirably:

“I am concerned about the lack of Chinese input. Conversations certainly have not been very productive; they tend to rely on the Dutch to do the talking. The scientific expertise of the Chinese also leaves much to be desired. One of their reputed professors did nothing other than babble into the microphone.”

Another informant told us that he had experienced the conversational style of the Chinese as indirect and found it difficult to determine what motivated their visit, speculating that a “lack of commitment to the centre” was behind it. In a similar vein, several informants said that they were afraid that the Chinese scientists were using the centre to improve the prestige and reputation of their own university rather than to find a mutually acceptable solution to scientific problems: “they are not really interested in discussing scientific issues and projects and want our university primarily for its good reputation.”

Summarizing, we can see that, to Dutch eyes, the Chinese conversational behaviour again consisted of many silences, which mainly took the form of not contributing to conversation in an open and goal-directed way as desired by the Dutch. The Dutch found this behaviour difficult to understand, negatively interpreting it as a lack of communication, invoking doubts about the motivation and intentions of the Chinese. Not everybody felt this way however; many people were still optimistic, emphasizing that the Dutch workshop was an “important learning experience” and that more “progress would be made in China.” Overall, however, people expressed initial concerns about the collaboration, and

enthusiasm began to wane. Distrust gradually evolved.

5.3. The Return Workshop in China

Nine months later, the Chinese committee organized a return workshop in China. In between these two large workshops, a number of initiatives were undertaken separately to strengthen and intensify relations between the sides. For example, staff mobility was actively encouraged, a guest professor was appointed to a temporary position in China, and several smaller faculty-bound exchanges and workshops were organized. The China workshop was seen as a crucial next step in the collaboration process, as it brought together an even greater number of Dutch and Chinese scientists who had been given small research grants to explore possibilities for connecting their individual research. As the workshop progressed, the Dutch perceived the Chinese communication style as including many silences, which they related to the selective provision of information, responsibility for conversations, and entitlements to speak.

5.3.1. Selectively Informing

A first issue that was seen as interfering with open and productive exchanges concerned the way the Chinese provided information about the process. Overall, Dutch informants had a very positive view of Chinese hospitality, commenting that they felt that the arrangements for the visit were particularly well organized. They mentioned that the “Chinese rolled out the red carpet” and went to great lengths to make their guests feel welcome; an appointed private chaperon picked the visitors up from the airport, and they were wined and dined with copious lunches and dinners. Despite feeling very welcome, several informants nevertheless complained that the Chinese did not inform them enough about the workshop proceedings. This had already started during email exchanges before the workshop, when several informants mentioned that they did not receive answers to their enquiries. During the workshop itself, informants reported that it was “hard and time-consuming to obtain information about the workshops.” One informant explained that there was no workshop programme or timetable available, and that locations for meetings were not communicated. Even though he had explicitly requested supplementary information several times, he had never received an answer. Others grumbled about how the Chinese asked them late in the evening to prepare presentations for the following day, not understanding why they had not “communicated this request at a more suitable time.”

Whereas some saw this as a minor nuisance, others felt that it obstructed the workshop preparation. A Dutch PhD student mentioned that she was uncomfortable with not being informed, because she had been awake all night and had not prepared her presentation in the way she would have liked. In a broader sense, people complained that many things remained implicit (“I have no clue what to expect of the workshop”) and the workshop was very “vague” and at times felt like a “roller-coaster”. In the eyes of another Dutch informant, the

Chinese “did not feel compelled to provide sufficient information,” and this was an “indication of poor planning” and “lack of responsibility for the process.”

5.3.2. Shifting Responsibility for Conversations

In the Dutch visitors’ opinion, an additional factor that stood in the way of open and productive exchanges was the issue of who was responsible for conversations. Dutch informants frequently mentioned that they could not comprehend Chinese conversational behaviour during meetings, reporting the loud answering of cell phones during presentations, talking among themselves in their own language, or suddenly walking away in the middle of a conference or meeting. One aspect of Chinese conversational style that struck Westerners as especially incomprehensible was the shifting of responsibilities for hosting and chairing meetings. In the Netherlands, informants explained, the ultimate responsibility for the meeting falls to the host, whose job is to introduce and address speakers and structure the discussion. Despite such expectations, during the China workshop, the Dutch felt that the Chinese left the responsibility for conversations to them, expecting them to do all the talking and explaining.

For example, we observed this during the joint welcome meeting on the first day of the workshop. The Dutch were invited to the Chinese auditorium, where they were seated opposite their hosts in a very large and formal meeting hall. Name cards were provided that marked the hierarchical pecking order. When it was time to officially open the session and proceed with the individual presentations, the Chinese remained seated and did not say anything, anticipating that the Dutch would take the lead in hosting the session. The Dutch, clearly not expecting or prepared to chair the meeting, exchanged uncomfortable glances, and in a small group deliberated how to continue. One of the key professors was clearly annoyed, telling his Dutch colleagues that “they were the guests and the Chinese should take responsibility.” With nobody sure about how to proceed, there was an uncomfortable silence, which was broken by one of the Dutch delegation leaders who felt that something should be said. He proceeded to address the audience, hosting the rest of day, as he would later tell us, “against his will”.

Similar incidents were observed in smaller meetings, during the second day of the workshop. For example, a senior architecture professor, who was suddenly expected to host a meeting, described the situation in an interview as follows:

“The professor who had arranged the meeting simply disappeared. She was in the corridor somewhere, chatting to people. I said: “Who’s chairing the meeting?” she shrugged her shoulders.... People just sat there while the Dutch person stood behind the lector wondering what to do.... I appointed myself as chairman of this session, but I was a bit annoyed about that because it should have been hosted by the Chinese side.... We ended up just talking to ourselves.”

Although Dutch informants could not always comprehend why their Chinese

colleagues did not take responsibility for the conversations, and felt that this obstructed open and productive exchanges, they nonetheless accepted and tolerated their partner's behaviour. No mention was made of this discontent during the meetings or other joint activities. When asked to comment, one Dutch informant mentioned that it was a question of responsibility: "They said nothing; we simply took our responsibility to encourage and facilitate critical discussion." The Dutch furthermore evaluated the silence of their partners negatively, explaining how they found it "annoying" and "impolite" and that it "curtailed open and meaningful conversations between researchers within the centre." This often resulted in character judgements, in which the Chinese behaviour was pictured as "unprofessional", "uncommitted", or "unmotivated".

5.3.3. Entitlements to Speak

A final silence that evoked Dutch concerns was the issue of collective communication norms, in which the Chinese social hierarchy between faculties was seen as interfering with open and direct conversations about the interdisciplinary objective of the centre. Different informants mentioned that Chinese scientists acted in accordance with the relative position of their faculty within the university, obeying the expectations and wishes of those of higher rank, claiming that not everyone could freely join in the conversation.

First of all, it was reported that Chinese scientists are seldom willing to give an opinion before their higher status peers, or were expected to remain silent or speak only when asked. One informant mentioned that her talkative partner became strangely silent during meetings when a superior was present, failing to articulate the progress they had made ("she just did not say anything anymore during the meeting"). In a broader sense, it was reported that individual Chinese researchers were discouraged by their superiors from talking to the Dutch. To the surprise of the Dutch policy delegation, the entire business economics research group that had visited the Netherlands was absent during the second workshop, which meant that they had to find new partners and start from scratch.

A similar incident occurred when a key Dutch policy professor heard through the grapevine that an anticipated Chinese partner was no longer allowed to participate in the centre, despite the considerable time and energy they had previously invested in building this particular relationship. Annoyed with this development, he tried to contact his envisioned partner, but was told that backstage politics were involved in Chinese frontstage obedience and nothing could be done. Another major incident occurred at the closing dinner, when members from the Dutch policy school were told that the research groups would breakup and dine in adjoining rooms in the same building. One of the policy professors was baffled, declaring that internal quarrels impeded the achievement of common goals: "having the final dinner apart from each other will accentuate disciplinary differences rather than mutual objectives as envisioned by the bilateral centre."

In interviews, Dutch informants indicated that respect for social hierarchy obstructed open and constructive conversations about the development of the centre, frequently accentuating their own Dutch egalitarian values, emphasizing that, in the Dutch scientific context, researchers were not restricted in “what they could say and to whom they could talk.” The Dutch participants were hesitant to interfere with Chinese internal affairs. Annoyed at being excluded by their Chinese partners, two of the leading Dutch policy professors tried to smooth things over by spontaneously visiting the architecture group, proposing a toast to their Chinese colleagues from that faculty. Despite this attempt, they did not push this issue very hard and could not avoid having to enjoy the rest of the evening only in the company of their policy faculty colleagues.

Despite viewing this as obstructing open and honest discussion, the Dutch did not raise these issues with the Chinese. The professor whose partners were suddenly removed from the collaboration explained in an interview how he found Chinese domestic affairs one of the hardest topics to address:

“Things are only undiscussable when they are really awkward, for example when they try to confuse one another. They do not like to talk about those things. They know they really cannot do that, but in China it is simply the case that organizations consist of warring factions. Although they treat one another in a cordial way at first sight, you often know that they are handing out blows beneath the surface... Once, I tried to mediate, but that was a waste of time.”

Not broaching the subject, however, exacerbated tensions. For example, it resulted in negative attributions about inter-faculty relations within the joint centre and a loss of confidence in the reliability of some partners. Several informants stated informally that they were annoyed and frustrated that the exclusion and silencing of speakers from the conversation made the limits of interdisciplinarity awkwardly apparent, explaining how it negatively influenced the attainment of common goals as endorsed by the bilateral centre. This led to attributions about the intention of the Chinese, best captured by the following key policy informant’s conclusion about the workshop: “The Chinese architecture professors are using the centre to establish and promote collaboration with other scientists.”

In sum, then, Chinese conversational behaviour was seen by the Dutch as including silences that interfered with their desire for openness and exchange. The Dutch felt that they were deliberately not informed, that they were impolitely expected to host and keep the conversation going and encourage people to talk, and that open and direct communication was impeded. This had a major impact on the quality of conversations. Chinese communication behaviour was negatively interpreted in Dutch circles, leading to judgements about the responsibility, earnestness, and commitment of the Chinese.

Although the joint centre was still in its development stage, a sense of disappointment dominated after the second workshop. People did not want to

dampen motivation, but there was a shared realization of the immensity of the challenge confronting them. Some people talked about the need to demonstrate progress, to yield quick deliverables; others stressed the importance of generating funding or creating more face-to-face connections and building trust. Some people seemed to have lost interest altogether, turning their focus of attention to other potential partners. If one thing has become clear from this study, it is that an important factor that will determine how the centre will develop is whether people will be able to find constructive ways to talk about, and bridge, their differences.

6. Discussion: Silence in Intercultural Research Collaboration

This paper began with the question of the moments of silence that could be identified in the process of establishing an international academic partnership with China, exploring the different meanings that the Dutch associated with Chinese silence, and how the interpretation of these silences influenced the course of the process through which common goals were to be accomplished. To answer these questions, we used material from an ethnographic case study, investigating the development and implementation of an innovative Sino–Dutch joint research centre in the area of sustainable urban systems and infrastructure development that required collaboration between a great number of scientists from different disciplinary, academic, and national cultures. Based on the findings of the ethnographic study, this research reveals that in the everyday practice of collaborating internationally, many things remain unsaid, and that the interpretation of these silences can lead to judgements, uncontested trusts, and distancing that negatively influences the achievement of common goals.

First of all, our study revealed that the Dutch participants, at various junctures during the process, perceived their Chinese partners as using silences within their communication. From the Dutch point of view, Chinese decision making was not transparent and involved periods in which the Chinese did not say anything for a long time, not conveying in an open and straightforward manner their interest in the collaboration. The Dutch also found their efforts to discuss the tangibles of scientific projects with the Chinese often unreciprocated, experiencing their communication style as indirect and unresponsive, culminating in awkward silences during the workshop meetings. In addition, the Dutch found that they were selectively or not at all informed by the Chinese about the workshop specifics, and felt that responsibility for chairing meetings and encouraging people to participate actively in discussions was left completely in their hands. It was also pointed out that not all Chinese scientists participating in the centre were given an equal opportunity to talk freely within the context of the joint centre.

Even though silence can communicate many things, the Dutch frequently gave a negative interpretation to Chinese silences, as a lack of communication.

The perceived Chinese behaviour of not speaking out clearly, failing to immediately provide feedback or reply to comments, not keeping people briefed, or silencing voices of subordinates, was not appreciated and portrayed as undesirable qualities of ongoing collaboration. Silence was seen, among other things, as needlessly delaying the process, impeding constructive discussions, and preventing centre researchers from talking freely and openly with one another. In other cases, silence was interpreted as the deliberate transgression of their desire for open and purposeful verbal exchanges (Tannen, 1984), for instance when speaking was considered the right of senior scientists and others spoke only when they were explicitly asked to share information. This confirms previous literature, in which silence is seen as “something aversive or defective, and that it, somehow, indicated failure to communicate” (Lemak, 2012: p. 157). This negative interpretation must be seen against the norm of what is considered good and productive communication. The Dutch perceived Chinese conversational behaviour vis-à-vis their own assumption that collaboration requires open, informal, and goal-oriented communication. In this sense, their Dutch academic culture, and the specific norms and expectations about interdisciplinary conversation that it implied, had a powerful impact on how the communication behaviour of others was perceived and valued.

Although perceived silences were regarded as impeding a constructive evolution of the process, the Dutch did not discuss their partner’s silences to find out what was really going on, for instance checking meaning, asking for clarification, or articulating discomfort or uneasiness. This suggests that sensitivities, assumptions, and evaluations are difficult to air during collaborative interaction. Several things may have compelled the Dutch to hold back opinions, sentiments, and personal interpretations, such as lack of time to respond immediately to others (Panteli & Fineman, 2005), not knowing how to make awkward differences discussible (Bennett, 1993), or a strong social pressure to adjust their behaviour and not to acknowledge the differences (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Nevertheless, the result was that awkward silences were filled in, for example by further elaborating research during meetings or trying to entice the Chinese to say more than they did during group discussions. When the Chinese researchers did not respond immediately, and their superiors did not encourage them to say something, the Dutch took over, hoping to elicit a response from the Chinese researchers. A spiral is recognized here through which values and norms about the meanings of silence and talk start to reinforce one another during interpersonal interaction. Those who do the talking start talking even more and more, whereas the others say less and less, leading to an amplification process in which opportunities to talk with, and understand, one another further decrease (Nakane, 2007).

Although our study clearly indicates that the Chinese communication behaviour was interpreted as silence, an important limitation is that we have not investigated the Chinese side in enough detail. Many of our observations seem to

reflect the concepts found in the literature discussed previously, which mention the relationship between silence and high-context communication, face, power distance, and group harmony (Chua, 2012; Herbig & Martin, 1998). Although the Chinese may have valued consideration more than involvement (Tannen, 1984: p. 107), using silence to build a good rapport, or instead found the Dutch way of talking pushy and boastful, expressing their dissatisfaction through refraining from talk, it is not possible to determine the precise meanings of Chinese communication behaviour from the current study. This limitation points to the need for further research on the Chinese use and interpretation of silence. Future studies should consider in more detail how Chinese scientists explain their own silence in collaborative situations as well as people's reactions to them; this will give a broader insight into their interpretations and a fuller account of the dynamics of silence in intercultural exchanges. Showing how Dutch and Chinese silences compare in terms of their functions and effects brings greater specification to the argument, and adds understanding of how intercultural misinterpretation occurs.

Despite these limitations, our study clearly demonstrates that, if meanings of silence are not explained, this can lead to evaluations or judgements about character or intentions, putting distance between collaborating parties. Although reserve was demonstrated in public, Dutch participants talked about these occurrences within their own group, often seeing them as evidence that their partners were not involved, unmotivated, and impolite. The Dutch, for example, evaluated the Chinese disinclination to host meetings as impolite, or questioned the commitment and earnestness of some of their partners when they did not respond in expected ways. In particular, when the pressure to deliver results increased, this led to harsher judgements about the Chinese intentions with regard to the collaboration more generally, for example portraying them as calculating, ignorant, untrustworthy, and uncooperative partners. Consistent with the literature on the subject (Lemak, 2012; Nakane, 2007), silence provided a basis for unfavourable judgements in ongoing interaction. Such negative judgements may become shared understandings that are largely unchallenged. People start to legitimize one another's views in awe-group, repeating, strengthening, and adding to one another's claims and arguments, with the result that understandings become uncontested truths and are put forward in a no-matter-what context (Aarts, van Lieshout, & van Woerkum, 2011). This affects the course of collaboration. In our study, initial excitement and fascination transformed into shared feelings of unease, annoyance, and irritation. Although the centre was still in its beginning stage, shared interpretations of silence caused defensiveness and profound feelings of distrust, increasing rather than bridging the distance between collaborators.

7. Conclusion and Implications

This paper raises important issues for research on international academic col-

laboration, showing that interpretations of silence, unintentionally, shape the unfolding nature of intercultural interactions, creating distance between parties that are seeking to accomplish common goals. The discussion demonstrates that silence is part of intercultural communication that makes international research collaboration difficult to accomplish, and that it is deemed essential to our understanding of these collaboration processes. Of course, we do not suggest that our research is representative of all collaborations with Chinese universities. In this particular research, this problem of silence was exacerbated by the specific institutionally driven character of the partnership and by the fact that the two sides did not have a previous history of working together. Many successful international collaborations build on previously established relationships between scientists, formalizing these relationships when there is sufficient support and trust. However, if researchers collaborate mainly to accomplish university policy on internationalization, this can mean that they must work with people whom they do not know, creating a strong likelihood that familiarity with each other's ways of communicating, and trust to clarify unclear behaviours, are lacking. This leaves room for unexplained silences to enter and shape the process. As [Jaworski \(1993\)](#) notes: "The more different another person appears to be from one's self, the more profound will be the silence of puzzlement, embarrassment, or anticipation of disambiguation of the situation" (p. 135). The silence of misinterpretation is thus bred by unfamiliarity ([Poland & Pederson, 2006: p. 298](#)).

The research also has practical significance. China is a growing scientific power and arguably one of the most important international academic partners for the future. Although there are many benefits from collaborating with China, scientists are often only poorly prepared to deal with cultural differences. Common membership of the scientific community is often seen as overriding national cultural identifications ([Traweek, 1992](#)). A major pitfall is that researchers may not see their problems as resulting from differences in intercultural communication. In addition to the long-recognized fact that increased intercultural competence can benefit collaboration ([Bennett, 1993](#)), we want to add that awareness of the varying shades of silence is particularly significant here and can improve how complex problems and differences are navigated in these projects. Silences are often taken for granted and easily overlooked. In today's intercultural academic work, understanding how the interpretation of the varying meanings associated with silence shapes the course of collaboration is necessary for deciphering the situation and reducing possibilities for misunderstanding and negative attributions ([Lemak, 2012](#)). In particular, checking unexplained silences can help prevent uncontested realities being confirmed and reproduced in interactions ([Ford, 1999; Aarts et al., 2011](#)). In our own research, this could have stimulated the Dutch centre researchers to address sensitivities, assumptions, and evaluations openly and check for clarity and understanding, helping them to understand what their partners actually meant and adjust their communication accordingly.

In our own research, we also struggled with Chinese silences. During interviews, getting informants to talk about certain topics proved difficult; they often answered our questions very briefly. This contrasts with informants from the Dutch university, who often elaborated extensively on our questions. Our natural reaction was to repeat the question and push for answers. With regard to the role of silence in interviewing techniques, Poland and Pederson (2006: p. 300) explain that intercultural sensitivity often results in forcing participants out of silence into speech. With this emphasis on collecting verbal statements, we may have missed important cues about silence. The study itself, however, made us gradually aware that, when one perceives silence, this does not inevitably mean that there is no communication. This awareness is part of taking responsibility for the conversations that we construct with others. Sensitivity to differences in silence usage makes us see that silence is always a co-construction, and that, by not checking or clarifying unexplained instances of silences during interaction, we may contribute to producing and keeping in place specific kinds of reality (Ford, 1999).

Despite the relevance of checking and clarifying unexplained silences, this is not always conceivable for scientists immersed in highly pressurized processes. Hence, international collaboration would benefit from skilful intercultural communication mediators. International academic projects often rely on the knowledge of foreign scientists participating in a collaborative process. In this particular study, Chinese professors and PhD candidates working in the Netherlands interceded between parties, for instance translating and giving cultural advice during interaction. Despite their valuable knowledge of both cultural worlds, volunteers are often poor liaisons because they have adopted the values of, and identify with, the host culture and may want to correct some of its key values. They tend to interpret rather than translate what is being said or not (Herbig & Martin, 1998). They may also be looked upon with suspicion in their own culture. Hence, independent and skilful intercultural communicators should be included in the collaboration process. In our research, such a person could have helped the centre researchers to educe the meanings of silence in meetings, making them hear clearly the meanings of what was not being said and working towards more constructive conversations about difference.

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