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# Everybody Does It: The Pragmatics and Perceptions of International Chinese Graduate Students and their American Peers Regarding Gossip

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### Cover Page Footnote

#### About the Authors:

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**Timothy John Ebsworth, PhD**, directed the Master's Programs in TESOL and Bilingual Education at the College of New Rochelle from 1995-2018. He is currently an Adjunct Professor in Second Language Education at Kean University, Union, N.J. and has extensive experience as a college ESL teacher, language teacher educator and researcher. His publications have appeared in the *Bilingual Research Journal*, *The International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, and the *Journal of Language and Social Interaction*. His interests include intercultural pragmatics and second language writing.

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# Everybody Does It: The Pragmatics and Perceptions of International Chinese Graduate Students and their American Peers Regarding Gossip

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Integrating natural observation, interviews, and quantitative analysis, we used a mixed design to compare the socio-linguistic judgments of international Chinese students at a private University on the East Coast of the United States (US) with those of their native English-speaking peers regarding a critical incident involving gossip. Ninety-two participants evaluated alternative sociolinguistic strategies offered in addressing the incident on semantic differential scales. Judgments by each group regarding four alternative responses were surveyed and compared. Twenty participants, ten from each group, participated in semi-structured interviews. Themes were developed through a recursive process: interpretations were validated by a bilingual bicultural expert. Several distinctions in judgments emerged. The most preferred alternative to dealing with a group gossiping about a friend for Americans was to say honestly that it made them uncomfortable while Chinese participants preferred requesting a change in topic. Such contrasts were found to be representative of underlying sociocultural values for each group. Intercultural pragmatic distinctions such as these could lead to pragmatic failure and have the potential to interfere with the development of intercultural friendship among the members of the two groups. Implications for pedagogy and developing cross-cultural insight are offered.

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**Keywords:** Chinese international students, Chinese versus American pragmatic judgments, critical incident, cross-cultural communication, gossip, intercultural pragmatics

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Gossip is an insidious, nasty, and completely counter-productive behavior. Unfortunately, it's also a delicious, beguiling temptation because it reinforces our all too human desire...to belong and to be on the inside. (Davey, 2014, para. 1)

The contact among students of diverse subcultures in the United States (US) universities creates special opportunities and challenges for individuals who seek to negotiate effectively. Members of sociolinguistic and ethnic subcultural groups tend to display distinct subconscious linguistic norms and social values that affect the language they produce and the meanings they attribute to what others do and say (Gass & Neu, 1995; Heng, 2018). As Abelmann and Kang (2014) point out, such diversity has created a need for information that will promote effective communication in the professional, educational, political, and social fora that we share. Thus, researchers attempt to facilitate cross-cultural interaction by deconstructing both the process of communication and the values, assumptions, and perceptions of interlocutors. One of the most active groups of international students in the United States today comes from China (Huang, 2012). In fact in 2018/19, there were more than 369,000 Chinese students studying in the United States (Institution of International Education, 2019).

This project seeks to explore the English-language communication of international Chinese students with their native English speaking peers in a U.S. university setting. Here we report on a subset of our data, responses to a critical incident (CI) involving gossip, a complex, potentially face-threatening speech event. We have chosen this focus as it illuminates some of the challenges, conflicts, and choices involved when students from distinct cultures interact socially together. In the graduate programs at Urban University (pseudonym), a high percentage of the graduate students are international pre- and in-service teachers from China and many are studying the pedagogy of English and/or Mandarin as a second or foreign language.

It has been noted that often Chinese students at home and in the United States are highly successful academically (Ellicott, 2013; Li, 2017). Nevertheless, they encounter a range of sociolinguistic and pragmatic challenges in their interactions with native English speakers, both within the university setting and in their communication with other community members (Huang & Brown, 2009; Ruble & Zhang, 2013; Snow, 2015; Zhou, 2010). A typical Chinese international student comments, "...I feel that I (pause), I haven't reached the goal of my studies here. I'm here to study, not simply for a degree, but here to understand the culture. But given my current state... I have few foreign friends..." (Heng, 2018, p. 31). Why are such relationships problematic? Through an examination of contrasting norms of behavior across U.S. and Chinese students, we seek to enhance the possibility of greater mutual acceptance among members of these communities in contact (Andrade, 2006), while providing insights of a more general nature regarding the communicative strategies of multicultural people.

Using a mixed design, this study employed the lens of intercultural pragmatics to understand the intended meanings of participants and their perspectives on the messages sent by other interlocutors as they consider alternative strategies for addressing situations in which knowing what to say and do can be socially sensitive. We begin by considering the insights offered by previous studies, followed by our research

approach. After presenting and discussing the findings we identify key implications for practice and future research.

## Background

### Intercultural Pragmatics

A considerable literature exists documenting the sociocultural and linguistic aspects of intercultural pragmatic patterns, ranging from the seminal work of Kluckhohn (1954) to the research reported in Gass and Neu (1995), Heng (2018), Tateyama (2008), Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (2016), and Yang (2019). Dicker's (1996) volume on language in the US stressed the richness of our multiethnic society, with its kaleidoscope of languages, language varieties, and cultures. Indeed, a sense of the complexity inherent in this nation's evolving cultural and communicative systems is found in texts such as those of González et al. (1996), García (1994), Sharifian (2015), and O'Keeffe et al. (2019). The effects of gender roles (Watson, 2012) and relative social status (Ellwardt et al., 2012) have also been considered.

Goddard and Ye (2015) discuss ethno-pragmatics highlighting the connection between community-specific speech practices and the cultural norms and values contrasting Anglo-English and Chinese cultures. Yang (2019) presents the construct of *lǐmào* (礼貌). "Chinese politeness including respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth, and refinement" (Yang, background information, para. 15). This underscores the values inherent in Chinese pragmatics which are likely to differ to some degree when compared with mainstream notions of politeness in the US (Jia, 2007). Such differences are amplified when interlocutors engage in face-threatening acts, such as responding to gossip (Redmond, 2015; Ting-Toomey, 2005). Watson (2012) notes that in both gossip and friendship individuals from cultures that favor more individualism versus those that privilege more collectivist values may experience challenges associated with this contrast.

Orton (2006) investigated the reactions of both Chinese and English-speaking academics to video clips of Chinese students using English in China. Orton recorded the responses of 10 Chinese and 10 native English-language academics to 20 video clips of Chinese students speaking English in monologue and conversational modes. Responses of the instructors were examined using a 4-item questionnaire with both open-ended and closed items. Participants responded not only to the language used but also to non-verbal aspects of communication. Results showed that while many features were in play, the kinesic aspects were especially challenging for the Chinese English speakers and contributed to the impressions formed by others. Orton interpreted these findings to underscore the importance of the social use of language by learners and the need for more research regarding judgments of second language pragmatics.

Bardovi-Harlig and Gass (2002) comment that research-derived descriptions of native-speaker usage have already begun to form the basis of materials developed for the teaching of some languages; they also suggest that "research in the acquisition of second language pragmatics and native-speaker judgements of interlanguage forms remains to be done" (p. 11). Here we focus on a CI involving gossip. Bloom (2004) highlights the potential of research on gossip as a "scientifically rich" domain that can

reveal important social norms and group dynamics in particular contexts. “Gossip is... universal... uniquely human... and plays a crucial social role” (p. 138). Participation in gossip is considered a gateway to group solidarity and membership (Ellwardt et al., 2012) and challenging gossip can be a face-threatening act (Al-Hindawi & Abukrooz, 2013).

As meanings are expressed in part through language, ethnographers and sociolinguists have underscored the important role played by linguistic and sociocultural factors in communicative competence (Bachman & Palmer, 1982; Bi, 1996; Canale & Swain, 1980; Goffman, 1981; Gu, 1990; Hymes, 1972). Further, cross-cultural variables have been identified as important in the potential for “sociopragmatic failure,” misunderstood messages resulting in communication breakdown (House, 1993; Tateyama, 2008), which may cause or reinforce negative stereotypes (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). It is not common for politeness to be viewed as universal and people often are unaware that differences in language and culture can change what is considered appropriate to say and do by individuals from a particular culture within the context of a specific situation. When the expectations of a speech community are violated by a member of another, that individual may be perceived as impolite or uncaring rather than somebody who is simply being polite according to the norms of a different language, variety, or community. Furthermore, relevant variables may crucially affect successful pragmatic choices in real-life contexts such as social distance, relative power of interlocutors and the degree of obligations incurred when performing particular speech acts (Yang, 2019).

Yuan et al. (2015), through questionnaire and focus group interview data, revealed that while Chinese university students learning English often had limited pragmatic competence in English, they recognized its importance and were positively disposed towards acquiring it. Over 65% of the 237 student respondents agreed that pragmatic knowledge was just as important as linguistic knowledge in language learning.

### **Chinese Students Studying Abroad**

We also note that the Chinese community of learners in the United States represents substantial sociolinguistic diversity. It is composed of native speakers of Mandarin and also bilingual or polylingual speakers of local varieties or languages as well as Mandarin. All participants in our study were fluent in Mandarin and had at least high intermediate proficiency in English (American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2012).

There is copious research documenting the contrast in academic processes and interactive norms in Chinese versus American and other Anglo settings (Turner, 2006; Wu, 2015; Yan & Berliner, 2009). However, social interaction presents its own challenges. In their study of Chinese students in higher education in Australia, Robertson et al. (2000) noted that Chinese students struggled with colloquial language in English and experienced feelings of isolation. Cho et al. (2008), whose focus was on Chinese students in U.S. accounting and business programs, also reported that Chinese learners expressed discomfort with local U.S. norms and values. One student explained that after study he planned to return to China because, “I don’t think my soul belongs

here” (p. 204). As generally reflected in scholarship here and in China, Cho et al. report that students have been socialized to Confucian values and Chinese culture, with a more collective rather than individual orientation.

Heng (2018) followed 18 Chinese students in a U.S. college over the period of one year. This research emphasized the complexity of the sociocultural and psychosocial context and was premised on the agency students possessed as they interacted and could adapt or contest the “values beliefs, and behavior associated with different sociocultural contexts” (p. 24). Use of English was the most frequently mentioned challenge for the students in the U.S. setting. Their academic study of English abroad did not prepare them for conversational interaction, and they characterized their conversational English usage as often inappropriate or stilted. Although they reported improvement over the course of a year, half of the participants continued to “experience some discomfort.”

Kingston and Forland (2008) report the experiences of Chinese students studying in the United Kingdom. Additional insights are offered by Gram et al. (2013), Wang and Shan (2007), Parris-Kidd and Barnett (2011), and Wu (2015). The work of Yang (2019) considers politeness from the perspective of U.S. English speakers using Mandarin in China, thus providing a useful contrast for members of both communities. In a special issue of *Applied Linguistics*, Jin and Cortazzi (2011) explore research on Chinese learners, presenting the importance of an in-depth consideration that reflects the diversity of this community and the need to exercise care in presenting generalizations regarding Chinese learners. Jia (2007) identifies conflicts between native speakers of English in the US and Chinese visitors, indicating how the “Anglo-American standard at the pragmatic level” can result in misinterpretations and misunderstandings when members of both communities communicate in English. Jia found that such examples of pragmatic failure had the potential of destroying friendships or preventing them from forming at all.

In our study, the communicative judgments of international Chinese students (ICS) will be compared to those of native English speakers from the United States who do not claim Chinese descent (USS). We consider the possibility that relationships among ICS and USS graduate students may include instances of pragmatic failure. Furthermore, the importance of such instances may be amplified when a conversation involves a potentially face-threatening act such as gossip.

### **What Is Gossip?**

The following definition of gossip includes widely accepted elements that characterize it in the literature: “Gossip is the exchange of personal information (positive or negative) in an evaluative way... about absent third parties” (Foster, 2004). Three elements that have been identified as necessary for gossip to take place include acquaintance among the gossipers and with the third party, absence of the third party, and the presumption of privacy regarding the conversation (Bergmann, 1993; Franks & Attia, 2011). Gossip can be casual or trivial (Rosnow, 2001), has the capacity to provide entertainment (Hedge, 2019), and can also cement relationships among the gossipers (Spires, 2015). Gossip can be implied or explicit, and while it does indeed have the potential to be neutral or positive (Noon & Delbridge, 1993), most gossip has been

found to be negative or critical (Eggins & Slade, 1997) and can even be malicious (Dunbar et al., 1997). Perreau de Pinnick et al.'s (2008) model of social norm enforcement identifies gossip as a strategy to sanction and ostracize individuals whose actions are contrary to social norms of behavior. This perspective is echoed in the work of Feinberg et al. (2012) who frame gossip as a form of punishment for anti-social behavior.

Stages of gossip that have been identified in the literature: Stage 1 consists of an invitation to engage in gossip. Stage 2 involves a focus on the person being gossiped about and a frame of the topic or behavior evaluated. It has been noted that this second stage affirms "shared attitudes and values as the basis for shared evaluations" (Franks & Attia, 2011, p. 172.) The third stage consists of discussion including negative evaluations around a theme that can be individually or jointly developed. (See also Wert & Salovey, 2004). Of course, substantial variation revolves around these parameters (Baumeister et al., 2004), and the veracity of the statements made can be open to question (Kuttler et al., 2002). On a more positive note, Baumeister et al. (2004) comment that one function of gossip is that it can provide for cultural learning and often incorporates social comparison and understanding (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Nevertheless, to join the gossip you have to opt in. In contrast, there may be repercussions if you opt out of this potentially social bonding event.

While we acknowledge that gossip can potentially provide useful cultural information, this is not the initial presumption the CI reported in our study, where problematic commentary seems to be implied. This assumption is discussed by Baumeister et al. (2004), who reported that "gossip tends to make people react with negative emotions in the majority of cases, but positive emotional reactions also occur" (p. 118).

### ***Challenging Gossip***

First, gossip is organized in a manner such that hearers are constrained to support the point of the gossip and not challenge it (Eder & Enke, 1991). Gossip primarily takes the form of conveying a piece of information that is heard by others and then confirmed without question. Regarding challenges to gossip: "...gossip tends to proceed, unchallenged for the most part, from story to story" (Wert & Salovey, 2004, p. 129). Furthermore, in their analysis of gossip in naturalistic settings, Eder and Enke (1991) found that if a hearer does not challenge the point being made during the next speaking turn, there will be no subsequent challenges to the gossip" (p. 116).

Gossip is officially discouraged by many cultures. In fact, describing others in negative terms to others when they are not present is not only against overtly stated social norms but also is viewed as a prohibited behavior by many religious communities (Yerkovich, 1977). Indeed, gossip is often a violation of peoples' personal principles. Yet, "against their better judgment, individuals often find themselves engaged in negative or even malicious discussions about peers, colleagues, or community members in their absence" (Wert & Salovey, 2004, p. 122). In a review of anthropological and sociological studies conducted by Bergmann (1993), the most common topics of gossip were "personal qualities and idiosyncrasies, behavioral surprises and inconsistencies, character flaws, discrepancies between actual behavior and moral claims, bad manners,

socially unaccepted modes of behavior, shortcomings, improprieties, omissions, presumptions, blamable mistakes, misfortunes, and failures” (Bergman, 1993, p. 15). At first, this list appears to suggest a preoccupation with complaining about our companions and community members. But further consideration reveals another common and related theme, that of evaluation. Each of these topics proceeds from an evaluation or a comparison. “Gossipers make a comparison between the person they are talking about and some social or egocentric reference point, such as social norms or their own perspective and behaviors” (Wert & Salovey, 2004, p. 123).

### ***Gossip and Friendship***

Participation in gossip is socially complex to the degree that those who gossip are engaging in common but questionable behavior which when challenged can entail a face-threatening act. There may also be the possibility for guilt associated with the realization of the cost to those who are being gossiped about (Griffin, 2019). Highlighting the need for additional studies on gossip, Foster’s research (2004) demonstrated that gossip could promote the development of collegiality while it might also reinforce inequality and conflict across social groups. Foster (2004) used a “Gossip Functions Questionnaire.” Items probed areas of gossip and friendship, personal behavior regarding gossip, and feelings experienced by the respondent about being party to gossip. Of particular relevance to our study is the item regarding “being around people who talk about other people behind their backs” (p. 99). A “Tendency to Gossip” Questionnaire was constructed in Hebrew and translated to English by Nevo et al. (1994). Created in Israel, it was aimed at college students. A version considered appropriate for use in the United States was also developed. Areas measured included: physical appearance, social information, achievements of others, and affective dimensions referred to as “sublimated” gossip.

Our study contributes to the conversation through the use of a critical incident, also framed by Wilson et al. (2000) as a “hypothetical vignette.” However, the situation described to our participants was actually reported in our data by an individual we interviewed in the development stage of our project. We chose examples that were considered to be problematic situations in which it was difficult or delicate to choose a response that would result in a satisfactory outcome to all concerned.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do selected ICS (international Chinese students) and USS (U.S. students) display their language and culture in their evaluation of sociolinguistic alternatives to a critical incident involving gossip?
2. What contrasts are observed between ICS and USS participants regarding their preferred responses to the gossip situation?
3. What explanations are offered in participant interviews to explain ICS and USS preferences?
4. How can we use this information to promote better mutual understanding and acceptance?

## Method

### Participants

Our participants, at the time of the study, were enrolled graduate students from Urban University (pseudonym), a large private higher education institution located in the Northeastern United States. These volunteers were primarily from middle or upper-class backgrounds though a few could be characterized as upwardly mobile with working-class roots. Among the 46 Chinese participants, there were nine male students and 37 female students. Their ages ranged between 21 and 29, with an average of 23.0. All speak Standard Mandarin as their first or second language (with an alternative Chinese variety as 1st language) and have at least a high intermediate level of English proficiency based on American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2012) guidelines. Twelve of them have also learned other foreign languages to some degree. American-born Chinese students were excluded from the study.

Among the 46 US native speakers of English participants, there were six male students and 40 female students. Their ages ranged between 22 and 55, with an average of 30.3. All US participants speak English as their first language. Thirty of them claim fluency in at least one foreign language. Only one had studied a Chinese language (Mandarin) and self-rated his proficiency as 4 on a 1-5 scale.

### Positionality of Researchers

The first author, Miriam Eisenstein Ebsworth, is a university professor in Multilingual Multicultural Studies. An English-dominant native speaker of Yiddish, her additional languages include Hebrew, French, and Spanish; she is currently studying Pǔtōnghuà (Mandarin Chinese). She has been involved in language education and research for over forty years and believes that all languages and varieties are valuable.

The second author, Timothy John Ebsworth, is a native of Wales, and is bilingual in English and Spanish. He has also lived in England and Puerto Rico, and currently resides and teaches in the mainland United States. He has extensive experience as a college ESL teacher, language teacher educator and researcher in intercultural pragmatics and applied linguistics. He is a passionate proponent of bilingualism and bilingual education.

The third author, Chencen Cai, is currently a researcher at The Center for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in China. A native of Mainland China with previous study and teaching experiences in Hong Kong and the United States, she is polylingual in Guilin Fāngyán, Mandarin Chinese, and English and has achieved intermediate proficiency in Cantonese. Based on her multilingual/multicultural experiences, she is interested in researching issues related to second language acquisition, language variation, and cross-cultural communication. She affirms the importance of all languages and varieties.

### Research Design and Data Analysis

Our study utilized a mixed methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), adapted from the work of Ebsworth and Ebsworth (2000). As noted above, judgments of responses to a critical incident (CI), a situation with potential for cross-cultural

misunderstanding (Brislin et al., 1986; Tatsuki & Houck, 2010), are used here as a lens for the analysis of common and distinctive norms for language use and associated cultural behavior. Derived from natural observation, ethnographic interviews, and the literature, the situations and responses presented to participants in our study were contextualized to include information about language used and nonverbal aspects of communication.

In the original study, participants responded to four alternative solutions to each of five critical incidents. Here we present the incident involving gossip in which the respondent must evaluate four proposed solutions derived from our research on 23 semantic differential scales, each representing a pair of opposite adjectives. The polarity of the scales (positive vs. negative) was randomly reversed so that each alternative would be evaluated independently. The polarity for all adjectives was subsequently recalculated for analysis so that 1=most negative and 7=most positive).

The following CI was presented to each participant:

“You are chatting with friends. The friends are talking about people you know and commenting critically on their relationships which makes you uncomfortable. You feel that this is gossip and you want to avoid it.”

The possible reactions to this CI presented to participants were:

Response 1 (Appearing Agreeable): Feeling concerned, I will join the conversation because I don't want to be isolated from my friends, although I feel uncomfortable talking about such topics. Since I am not confident in my expressions, I may just show my agreement with my friends and try to continue the conversation by making general comments. I say, “Really? That surprises me!”

Response 2 (False Excuse for Leaving): I don't like gossiping, so I just leave the conversation and stay aside for a while. I pretend that I have to use the bathroom and I excuse myself, hoping that the topic will be different when I return. I say, “Excuse me, I need the bathroom for a second. I'll be right back.” If the topic hasn't changed, I will find a pretext to leave and not return at that time.

Response 3 (Trying to Change the Topic): I think it is not respectful to talk about others' relationships in this way. I may raise a new topic and try to get my friends' attention. At the first opportunity in the conversation, I say, “Hey! Has anyone seen the new movie XXX (name)? ...”

Response 4 (The Honest Approach): I do not like participating in this kind of gossip. I decide to be honest with my friends and request a change of topic (If they continue anyway, I excuse myself). I say, “Listen guys, this is making me really uncomfortable. XXX (name) is/are my friend(s). Can we change the topic please?”

The above four alternative responses to the Gossip CI were presented in randomized order to the participants.

The data were viewed from a cross-cultural perspective that incorporates the way members of each group interpret their own language and behavior as well as that of the other group(s). While the quantitative component of this research was elicited through English, the contact language typically used between ICS and USS (native U.S.) peers, interviews had two functions. Initially, they were used along with natural

observation to develop the quantitative instrument. Semi-structured post-hoc interviews (Seidman, 2006) were also important for data interpretation and insights. These were conducted by the third author, Chencen Cai, in the language(s) most comfortable for the interviewee (Mandarin, English, or both) in order to promote freedom of expression and clarity of communication as some expressions may be difficult for bilingual respondents to translate (Ohta & Prior, 2019; Ryen, 2001). The interpretation of all data incorporates the views of native informants from each community, the three authors, and the analysis of a bicultural expert, a professional educator who has lived successfully in the United States and in Mainland China.

### **Limitations**

The researchers recognize that only Chinese students who are relatively bilingual in English and Mandarin are represented in this study; the degree to which the views of monolingual speakers of Chinese varieties are reflected here must await further investigation. In addition, since participants are pre- or in-service teachers, and 30 of the USS have working knowledge of a second language, we cannot extrapolate to the views of USS who do not speak a second language. Finally, as noted above, US-born Chinese students were not included in this study.

### **Quantitative Results**

We first considered the appropriate approach to analyzing the quantitative data. While there is a debate regarding whether semantic differential scale data should be treated as interval or ordinal (Laerd Statistics, 2019), we have taken the more conservative view and are treating it as ordinal. The current sample satisfies all the assumptions of the Mann-Whitney U test which was found to be appropriate for comparing Chinese and US students' judgments of the four options suggested as possible responses to the gossip situation.

Although we began with 23 scales, we eliminated four in pilot testing, namely unmasculine/masculine, unfeminine/feminine, unassertive/assertive, and usual/unusual. We discovered that notions of masculinity and femininity tended to be interpreted differently in each culture and could not be quantitatively compared in a meaningful way. Further, the notion of assertiveness was interpreted to be a somewhat positive descriptor by USS but a somewhat negative one by Chinese respondents, and the usual/unusual dimension was unclear to some members of both groups.

We also found that several of the scales were significantly correlated (Spearman's Rho). This left us with six scales to consider in the final quantitative analysis.

- Bad/good (correlated with: ineffective/effective; negative/positive; unintelligent/intelligent)
- Immature/mature (correlated with nonaggressive/aggressive; uncontrolled/controlled)
- Inconsiderate/considerate (correlated with uncooperative/cooperative; unfriendly/friendly)

- Offensive/inoffensive (correlated with inappropriate/appropriate; discourteous/courteous; disrespectful/respectful; unsympathetic/sympathetic)
- Passive/active (direct/indirect; submissive/unsubmissive)
- Face-threatening/not face-threatening

Descriptive statistics appear below.

**Table 1**

*Response 1 Appearing Agreeable: Descriptive Statistics*

Scales	Chinese			American			Total		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Bad--good	46	3.87	1.24	46	3.74	1.20	92	3.80	1.22
Immature--mature	46	3.72	1.50	46	3.83	1.60	92	3.77	1.54
Inconsiderate--considerate	46	4.46	1.44	46	4.13	1.44	92	4.29	1.44
Offensive--inoffensive	46	4.13	2.04	46	3.83	1.50	92	3.98	1.79
Passive--active	46	2.74	1.60	46	2.13	1.22	92	2.43	1.45
Face-threat--not face-threat	46	4.93	1.50	46	5.50	1.44	92	5.22	1.49

Regarding the *Appearing Agreeable* option, no significant statistical differences were found between groups. Both rated this option as slightly negative on bad/good, and maturity. They each considered it somewhat passive, not very face threatening and slightly considerate. While the mean for USS showed that they regarded this option as slightly offensive and Chinese on average judged it to be slightly inoffensive, this difference did not reach significance based on the Mann-Whitney U test.

**Table 2**

*Response 2 False Excuse for Leaving: Descriptive Statistics*

Scales	Chinese			American			Total		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Bad--good	46	4.96	1.21	46	4.70	1.56	92	4.83	1.40
Immature--mature	46	4.57	1.46	46	4.46	1.56	92	4.51	1.50
Inconsiderate--considerate	46	4.80	1.36	46	4.96	1.41	92	4.88	1.38
Offensive--inoffensive	46	4.02	1.68	46	4.85	1.67	92	4.43	1.72
Passive--active	46	4.02	1.78	46	3.35	1.99	92	3.68	1.91
Face-threat--not face-threat	46	4.98	1.39	46	5.39	1.39	92	5.18	1.40

Regarding the strategy of presenting a *False Excuse for Leaving*, only one option showed a significant between-group difference, namely degree of offensiveness (Mann-Whitney U=796.0,  $p = .037$ ). While the Chinese participants were close to neutral in their judgments on this scale, their USS peers found this to be slightly less offensive. Other evaluations of this option had both groups in agreement, finding it somewhat

good, somewhat mature, somewhat considerate, and not very face threatening. Though the USS scored it a bit more positively as less face threatening, this apparent difference did not reach statistical significance. While the Chinese students rated this option near neutral on activeness, the USS participants thought this was relatively more passive. Nevertheless, the between-group difference of this scale did not reach statistical significance.

**Table 3**

*Response 3 Trying to Change the Topic: Descriptive Statistics*

Scales	Chinese			American			Total		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Bad--good	46	5.41	1.36	46	5.17	1.31	92	5.29	1.33
Immature--mature	46	5.22	1.32	46	5.30	1.23	92	5.26	1.27
Inconsiderate--considerate	46	5.28	1.38	46	5.35	1.34	92	5.32	1.35
Offensive--inoffensive	46	4.17	1.89	46	5.11	1.57	92	4.64	1.79
Passive--active	46	6.00	1.01	46	5.33	1.54	92	5.66	1.34
Face-threat--not face-threat	46	4.43	1.66	46	5.13	1.66	92	4.78	1.68

Regarding the strategy of *Trying to Change the Topic*, three between-group differences were found to be significant, namely offensiveness (Mann-Whitney  $U=754.0$ ,  $p=.016$ ), passive/active (Mann-Whitney  $U=799.5$ ,  $p=.036$ ), and face-threatening/not face-threatening (Mann-Whitney  $U=795.0$ ,  $p=.036$ ). Though neither group rated it as offensive, USS found it significantly more inoffensive. In addition, while both groups rated this strategy as somewhat active, Chinese participants rated it to be relatively more active than their USS peers. Furthermore, while both groups believed that this option was not face-threatening, USS considered it relatively less face-threatening. Both groups found this option somewhat good, somewhat mature, and somewhat considerate.

**Table 4**

*Response 4 The Honest Approach: Descriptive Statistics*

Scales	Chinese			American			Total		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Bad--good	46	3.54	1.63	46	5.59	1.41	92	4.57	1.83
Immature--mature	46	3.78	1.62	46	6.24	1.25	92	5.01	1.90
Inconsiderate--considerate	46	3.57	1.59	46	5.54	1.44	92	4.55	1.81
Offensive--inoffensive	46	3.33	1.49	46	4.43	1.81	92	3.88	1.74
Passive--active	46	5.78	1.52	46	6.52	.86	92	6.15	1.28
Face-threat--not face-threat	46	2.74	1.51	46	3.43	1.76	92	3.09	1.67

Regarding the strategy of *The Honest Approach*, the Chinese and USS groups differed significantly on all semantic differential scales. Chinese students found it slightly bad while USS found it somewhat good (Mann-Whitney  $U=377.0$ ,  $p<0.001$ ),

Chinese students found it somewhat immature and somewhat inconsiderate while USS rated it highly on maturity and found it to be somewhat considerate (Mann-Whitney  $U=253.5$ ,  $p < .001$  and Mann-Whitney  $U=386.0$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Chinese participants saw it as slightly offensive while USS found it slightly inoffensive (Mann-Whitney  $U=718.5$ ,  $p = .007$ ). Both found it active, but USS did so to a greater degree (Mann-Whitney  $U=759.5$ ,  $p = .009$ ). Both groups rated this as posing a threat to face, with USS interpreting this strategy as a threat to face to a lesser degree than their Chinese peers (Mann-Whitney  $U=804.0$ ,  $p = .043$ ).

We note that on the bad/good evaluation, the groups rated the four options from most positive to most negative as follows:

#### American Preferences

1. Honest approach
2. Change the topic
3. False excuse for leaving
4. Appear agreeable

#### Chinese Preferences

1. Change the topic
2. False excuse for leaving
3. Appear agreeable
4. Honest approach

We found it most provocative that the favorite USS choice, *The Honest Approach*, was the one least favored by the Chinese. We will explore these differences further below. Our interview data helps to illuminate the norms and values of participants that contribute to their reactions to the proposed responses to the CI.

### Qualitative Data

When interviewees were asked to rank order their preferences regarding the four alternative strategies, their choices were consistent with the quantitative results. A majority of the USS ranked the honest approach as their first choice, while a majority of the Chinese participants ranked this as their last choice.

Recursive analysis followed by triangulation of interpretation produced the following themes. Due to space limitations, only one or two typical quotations are offered to illustrate participant voices. Themes below are grouped by those shared by both groups, those more typical of USS, those more typical of Chinese participants, and minority voices from each group. All participant names presented below are pseudonyms.

#### Shared Themes

As indicated in the quantitative data and confirmed in the interviews, we discovered some commonalities in the views of several participants from each group. These themes included the following:

1. **Gossip happens.** A majority of USS and Chinese interviewees shared that situations involving gossip were a common part of their social experience. For example, Tova stated, "I feel like gossip is something that is very natural." Zhixiang also affirmed, "This (gossip) happens a lot in real life."
2. **Gossiping is a bad idea.** Many interviewees in each group expressed that gossiping was viewed in their cultures as a negative activity, one which should be avoided if possible. This value was frequently stated by participants, both in local and universal terms. Norma commented, "It's an American cultural

value knowing to not partake in gossip.” Similarly, Hua reflected, “In Chinese culture, I think in any culture, it is not very good to gossip.”

- 3. Personality will affect one’s strategy.** Many interviewees addressed this issue. Some spoke about how their own personalities would influence their decision on how to behave. Emily personalized her preference, “Personality-wise... I’m a more direct person.” Xiaolu took a different approach, “...I think my personality is I won’t tell them directly that I don’t feel comfortable about the topic.” More general statements regarding the personalities of others were also ubiquitous. For example, Megan commented, “Some people are not confrontational.”

It was also noted that on occasion an individual’s personality might override a general cultural proclivity. Adina noted, “Americans hate conflict, except for the ones that love it!” Huiting added, “I think this is related to personality. Some people can be very direct. They may be very angry and say, “How can you say this?”

- 4. The nature of the gossip matters.** Many comments from both groups reflected on the importance of the content and intention of the gossip itself. Was it frivolous, catty, or did it reveal a serious breach? Was the purpose of the gossip to elicit empathy? Shelly commented, “If someone’s talking about how somebody hurt them or did something to them personally, and they wanna vent their frustrations about how they were treated, that’s different to me.” Cheryl mentioned, “If the gossip is sounding really mean, I would not like to include myself in those things.” Finally, Jing offered, “I may not speak directly unless this issue makes me feel very angry or offended.”
- 5. Relationships will affect strategies.** Both groups noted that the nature of their relationships with stakeholders were involved in determining choices. “I don’t really know the person they’re gossiping about, and I don’t really know them that well either. In that case I just might stay quiet because I don’t have as much at stake, even if I’m uncomfortable,” Emily said. Tova also expressed concern about maintaining a relationship with the gossipers, “I don’t want my friends to feel like I’m judging them.” Some Chinese interviewees’ comments on this theme were parallel to those of their USS peers. Yaxin expressed, “If we (the gossipers) are not close, I may just want to listen.”
- 6. Give gossipers the benefit of a doubt; do not judge them.** Several participants commented on this issue. Huiting explained, “Since I don’t know what happened between them and this person, maybe it is something which violates the principles and is very bad.” Moran commented, “I would just be agreeable, but I won’t be judgmental.”

## USS Themes

The following themes were derived from explicit comments made by USS in our interviews. (We are unable to say definitively the degree to which the perspectives and values offered by the participants might not have also resonated with the alternative group.)

- 1. Honesty and directness are valued.** Many U.S. interviewees addressed this norm. Sam stated, “I’ll be honest. I need to say, Alicia is my friend. I don’t want to talk about her. I feel uncomfortable.” Emily was philosophical and referred to what she was taught, “Honesty, it’s better for everybody. It’s better for the friend they’re talking about, it’s better for them because they understand that it’s making you uncomfortable and they hopefully wouldn’t want to do that... I guess I was kind of taught to speak your mind as long as you can back it up.”
- 2. Loyalty goes with friendship.** Often U.S. participants expressed that they felt a responsibility to defend an absent friend and associated doing so with loyalty. “...at least I’m loyal”. Sam explained, “You know if someone is my friend, and I think they’re a good person, I’ll defend their name. I will defend them.”
- 3. Responsibility to say gossip is wrong.** Several USS felt a responsibility not only to their absent friend, but also to the group who is gossiping. Adina clarified, “(Friends) have the right to know that what they’re doing is making me uncomfortable. I have a responsibility to set them straight.”
- 4. Privacy boundaries should be respected.** U.S. participants drew our attention to the value of privacy. For example, Shelly expressed, “Criticizing each other over stuff that’s none of our business-I think that’s disgusting...”
- 5. Recognizing the relationship of culture and threat to face.** USS respondents often commented that cultures differ regarding this issue and tied their projected behavior to local norms. Joanne expressed the thought that “we don’t really save face here that much... in American culture.”
- 6. White lies and real lies.** U.S. participants were less comfortable with telling a white lie to extract themselves from the gossip situation. In evaluating the white lie option, Emily was among those who stated simply “I hate to lie.”
- 7. Consequences of not confronting the gossip.** Megan explained, “Leaving, it’s the safest route, but I feel like it’s going to accomplish the least.” Sam also focused on outcomes, “Leaving does not help. I need to fix the problem.”
- 8. Gender.** Interestingly, gender was alluded to by participants in terms of stereotypes rather than what people really do. For example, Tova commented, “Gender has a role to play as well in that there’s that image of women gossiping around a table.”
- 9. Age.** A few USS suggested that there may be a shift in culture over time and felt that more indirect choices might be more typical of older individuals. Norma suggested, “It might be more typical of people that are older in age...” Joanne talked about how age might influence the likelihood of gossip itself, “I really don’t do this a lot, because my life is at such a different point. There’s not a lot of gossip time. I understand that people still do that, but it’s not like when it was younger, in high school or college.”

## Chinese Themes

The following themes were developed through explicit comments made by the Chinese participants.

1. **All people's feelings matter a lot.** Xiaolu elaborated, "I want to take care of both sides... I'm affected by the Chinese value, the feelings of any people **(matter)**... I would choose Response 2 **(leave)** because it is affected by the Chinese value, which is not to hurt the feeling of any people... I don't want to let the friends who I'm chatting with feel that I don't like their topic or I'm different from them... But on the other side they are talking about something that I don't really want to talk about. I'd rather leave the conversation..."
2. **Indirectness is related to saving face.** Hua stated, "I prefer indirect approaches because it's a conversation between friends so I shouldn't be too direct and we should save each other's face, we shouldn't let others lose face." Similarly, Jing explained, "I like to be more indirect, yes, yes. I may not be that intentional or let people realize immediately that oh, you don't like this...I think when I am making choices, I am more affected by Chinese culture."
3. **White lies can be OK.** Xiaolu said simply, "I'll pretend I have some other things to do." Yuzhe echoed this approach, "I will find an excuse, such as making a phone call. I will not participate **(in the gossip)**."
4. **Gossiping is not so serious.** A number of Chinese respondents felt that this incident was not of great consequence. Yuzhe reflected, "That kind of chatting is not very personal and we should not care about this too much, it is OK to chat on the surface. I may prioritize the first one, **(appear agreeable)**."
5. **Avoid conflicts.** Hua was among those who explicitly talked about avoiding confrontation, "Being indirect, because they are all friends, no matter what kind of friends, I should not quarrel with them openly." Huiting excluded the honest approach as a good choice, "This (direct strategy) is very embarrassing." Yaxin was categorical, "I think definitely no one will choose 4 **(the honest approach)**."
6. **Social relationships can limit choices.** Hua was among those who explained that the presence of a higher status individual would limit choice, "If one of the gossipers is 'lǐngdǎo' **(□ □, a leader)**, I will not be free to disagree or even leave. I will have to stay silent." This power dynamic of the listener's relationship to the gossipers was unique to the Chinese interviewees.  
 Moran shared a similar feeling about communicating with people of a higher social status, "I think I will leave the conversation **(Response 2)**. Since I would like to leave a good impression on my parents or other elderly **(senior)** people, I don't want to make them feel that I have biases for gossiping or others. In China, the status of elderly **(senior)** people is higher, which is not like between friends."
7. **Limits on command of English can affect choice.** An interesting insight regarded the constraints imposed on a listener whose options are limited by their second language proficiency. Suling pointed out, "If these are Chinese

friends, the possibility of 4 (**the honest approach**) will be higher, because I can express clearly using the language and I know how to express opinions without offending them. However, with American friends, since I cannot express clearly in English, by taking choice 4, I may leave a bad impression on this group of friends." Yaxin took a similar stance, "If I speak Chinese, I may directly say, 'Do you think what we have said may be a bit inappropriate?'"

- 8. Gossiping is interesting.** Some Chinese participants acknowledged that gossip can have its positive aspects. Huiting admitted, "I like gossips and would like to know what others think about that person or whether there is something I don't know."
- 9. Gossiping as spying.** Yaxin was among those who thought that staying to hear what is being said can be potentially useful, "As for appearing agreeable, as long as I am listening, it is OK if I have learned something... I can secretly tell that friend about what others have talked about you!"

### Minority Voices

While the majority of individuals within groups made consistent comments, these were not always universal. The following minority opinions were among those expressed:

#### *Chinese Participants*

One minority view shared by one Chinese participant is that when communicating with family or close friends, they would choose a more direct strategy. As Yuzhe commented, "If these are close friends and they have heard some gossips and discuss in our group, I may choose the 4th one, which is to speak directly, because I don't think expressing my opinions will affect our friendship."

#### *USS Participants*

Some USS participants, like their Chinese peers, balanced honesty with concern for people's feelings. As Stella said, "Trying to change the topic of the conversation is a way for me to remain with the group of people I'm with."

Despite a generally positive view of the honest approach, in some cases directness was associated by U.S. participants with discomfort that could lead to misunderstanding. Joanne explained, "...People that are really direct like that, sometimes they just come across the wrong way." This is echoed in Stella's comment, "I think that, as much as in America we wanna be direct and clear, we do have an understanding that either going with the flow when things are not okay, or being direct like in Response 4, might make people uncomfortable."

The next section explores insights that emerge from an integration of the quantitative and qualitative data.

## Discussion

First, it is important to note commonalities among the participants. Students from both groups affirm that gossip is a normal aspect of their social experience and one which is generally viewed from a negative perspective. Nevertheless, participants

acknowledge that the personality of the listener will interact with and sometimes overcome the social constraints that may be involved in this culturally complex activity.

In addition, it is generally recognized by most participants that they perceived a need to balance several factors in approaching the gossip, including allegiances to the absent friend as well as the group that is present and engaged in the conversation. The strength of the various relationships will count in the decision of the listener as will the content of the information conveyed and its potential seriousness. Chinese and U.S. interlocutors consider issues of risk to their continued relationships with the gossipers and the absent friend. As Erickson et al. (2011) affirm, human practices are much more complicated than passive adherence to any system of cultural norms of behavior.

Nevertheless, in weighing the complex variables informing their projections of how they would behave in the gossip situation, the majority of participants from each group contrast not only in their preferences for one strategy over another, but also in the way they frame their decisions. The most salient distinction between the groups is that the honest approach in which the listener calls out the gossipers for their inappropriate talk, directly or indirectly, is the most favored approach of the USS participants as shown by the quantitative data, while this is the last choice of most Chinese participants. In fact, for some, it is not even considered a possible choice under any circumstances. Heng (2018) explains that the collectivistic nature of Chinese society highlights that one should avoid bringing attention to oneself, making it difficult for an individual to confront the gossipers directly. It is of interest that the one Chinese interviewee who was prepared to deal directly with the group, framed the issue as what “we have said” even though that speaker is just a listener and is not responsible for the gossip. From the Chinese perspective, the function of this question is to act as a suggestion (Chinese bicultural expert, personal communication, December 3, 2019). The expression of “we” sounds polite, and it may be easier for the gossipers to accept this suggestion since the speaker is taking an inclusive stance.

Several USS privileged the value of honesty and directness in preferring the honest approach and considered this the most ethical choice from their perspectives. In addition, a substantial number of interviewees referred to the importance of loyalty in coming to the defense of their absent friend. An issue uniquely raised by the USS was their responsibility not only to the absent friend but their responsibility to the community of gossipers to call out their inappropriate behavior. One interviewee pointed out that she felt free to choose the honest approach because the US cultural context did not prioritize a threat to face as other cultural contexts might. Furthermore, in rejecting the white lie approach, several USS interviewees commented that even a white lie was still a lie, and this violation of the principle that one should be truthful was not warranted in this situation. The issue of gender was also raised by one USS because she was sensitive to the stereotype that women in particular are prone to gossip.

Interviews with Chinese participants revealed a frequent focus on different priorities. For most of the Chinese students, balancing the feelings of gossipers and the absent friend meant bypassing confrontation with the gossipers while avoiding being party to the gossip if possible. This caused them to prefer changing the topic if possible or presenting a false excuse for leaving the conversation. A common perspective

expressed by the Chinese participants specified the cultural value of considering the feelings of every individual and the need to avert direct conflict in order to save face for all concerned. Several interviewees referred to the desire to avoid being judgmental. While one Chinese participant wanted to avoid being judgmental in order to keep an open mind in a general sense, another explicitly considered the possibility that the gossip might have been justified because the targeted individual might have done something sufficiently serious to warrant the gossip.

The possible influence of power and status in the inter-group relationships was also considered by several Chinese participants while it was never alluded to by USS interviewees. The presence of a higher status person who is considered “*língdǎo* (□ □ , a leader)” would preclude the alternatives of leaving the conversation under any circumstances or indicating discomfort with the topic as either option could be viewed as disrespectful. While it is also the case that USS theoretically might find themselves under greater pressure if a higher status person was involved in the gossip, this possibility was not raised in any of the interviews. Interestingly, Nevo et al. (1994) considered relative social status as a factor in how gossip might be perceived and Watson (2012) noted gender differences in the nature of how friendship and social issues interacted in gossip outcomes.

Another question that arose for the Chinese informants had to do with their lack of sufficient English proficiency to navigate this difficult incident, which was characterized as “very embarrassing,” and in which they feared using “inappropriate expressions” that could result in misunderstandings. In fact, several participants said they might be more forthcoming about their own feelings and reservations with a group of interlocutors who were also Chinese, with whom they could use their dominant language more freely and expressively and whose communication norms were mutually understood.

Despite having identified substantial within-group consensus, it is important to note that interviews revealed minority voices in both communities. The least favored choice for most Chinese informants was still possible for one individual (Yuzhe) who was prepared to risk speaking directly under the condition that he was sufficiently close to the gossipers to believe doing so would not constitute a risk to their friendship. Two USS interviewees preferred changing the topic, eschewing the honest approach. In one case this was to avoid appearing judgmental and in another because this alternative allowed them to avoid leaving the conversation, which implicitly might involve face-threatening behavior. Another USS expressed concern regarding a behavior that might make the gossipers uncomfortable. Finally, one USS did not want her friends to think of her as judgmental, a value more commonly referred to by the Chinese participants.

## Conclusion and Implications

An understanding of the sociocultural values and conventions revealed through this research demonstrates the need for active interventions to help members of both groups develop greater personal awareness and understanding of the other group. Pierce and Walz (2002), for example, highlight the need for language teachers to understand not only what norms are appropriate for natives, but also the importance of understanding the “attitudes of learners themselves” (p. 32).

Heng (2018) recommends diversity and intercultural education that encourage individuals to place themselves in the others' position, given an understanding of the constraints and norms under which they are functioning. At the same time, it is important to create opportunities for inter-group interaction and to refocus mindsets from 'us versus them' to 'we' (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010). Creating extra-curricular activities of a social nature that will encourage cross-cultural sharing can provide opportunities for students to apply and explore their evolving comprehension of themselves and others.

In an article intended for English teachers of Chinese learners, Pavlik (2012) reviews cultural and pragmatic differences between these two communities. Among the issues she addresses are contrasts in communication norms and values within friendships such as sharing personal information, asking for advice, and an awareness of conversational taboos. The language learning app, Duolingo stresses that learning the pragmatics of language is crucial for effective social communication and incorporates this dimension in its materials (Moline & Blanco, 2020). A review of such pedagogical materials by classes comprised of both Chinese and USS students will be helpful in giving Chinese students the opportunity to explain their sociolinguistic choices to their USS peers and will offer both communities opportunities to share their understandings. Resources for teachers and curriculum developers like those based on the principles offered by Ishihara and Cohen (2010) recommend encouraging such conscious-raising activities and the opportunity for reflection by participants.

It is also crucial to avoid generalizing and to explore individual experiences, considering variables such as length of stay in country, purpose for study, and gender orientation. Our data demonstrate that despite substantial within-group consistency, there were minority voices and a range of perspectives among members of both communities.

While our study included English native speaker reactions to alternatives more typical of Chinese peers, future investigations should clarify to what degree native expectations incorporate flexibility in judging the appropriateness of non-native English usage (Pierce & Walz, 2002; Valdman, 1992).

Research should consider a broad range of challenging situations and how they might be perceived by students of different ages, proficiency levels, gender orientations, and professional aspirations. Longitudinal study of international students as their understanding evolves over time will also be an important element to consider.

We hope that the insights offered here may serve to enlighten and motivate educational and investigative professionals as our shared communities continue to evolve an understanding of how students and other individuals from different sociolinguistic and cultural backgrounds respond to challenging situations. Developing intercultural awareness through research and reflection will help to bring about a more satisfying and peaceful resolution to potential conflicts of intercultural pragmatics.

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