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Nonverbal Communication and Rituals in Intercultural Friendship Development: A Three-Semester Longitudinal Study at a Chinese University

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative longitudinal study examines how nonverbal communication and cultural rituals shape intercultural friendship development between Chinese and international students at a Chinese university. Drawing on three waves of semistructured interviews and participant observation across three semesters with 50 participants, the study traces how silence, body language, shared meals, gift exchanges, and everyday rituals change in meaning as relationships deepen. The findings show that these practices initially reduced uncertainty and supported first contact but later became expressions of trust, empathy, reciprocity, emotional support, and shared belonging. Nonverbal communication also facilitated cultural adaptation through mutual adjustment, whereas repeated ritual participation contributed to the gradual formation of a shared “third culture.” This study advances intercultural communication research by conceptualizing nonverbal behavior as dynamic and relationally evolving.

Keywords: cultural rituals, emotional regulation, intercultural friendships, nonverbal communication, Third Culture Building

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Introduction

The internationalization of higher education has significantly transformed university life worldwide, particularly in China, where the increasing presence of international students has enhanced campus diversity (Gutema et al., 2023). In this dynamic environment, intercultural friendship plays a key role in students' social integration, emotional well-being, and academic success. As Chinese universities expand their international profiles, understanding how friendships form and evolve across cultural boundaries is crucial.

While substantial research has focused on verbal communication, self-disclosure, and language-based negotiation in intercultural interactions, less attention has been given to how friendships develop when language fluency is limited by barriers such as linguistic differences, cultural expectations, and communication uncertainty. In multilingual university settings, friendships often begin before students can rely on verbal exchange, suggesting that nonverbal communication is a central component of intercultural friendship development rather than a marginal component.

This issue is particularly pertinent in Chinese universities, where indirectness, relational sensitivity, and social harmony guide everyday communication (Anjum et al., 2025). Although prior studies have highlighted nonverbal cues such as silence, body language, and rituals in intercultural settings, many treat these cues as static, overlooking how their meanings evolve as friendships progress. This study uniquely addresses this gap in research by exploring how the significance of nonverbal practices evolves over time in intercultural friendships.

This study aims to fill both empirical and theoretical gaps. Empirically, it examines how nonverbal communication and cultural rituals develop across different stages of intercultural friendship, using a longitudinal approach to track their evolution over three semesters.

Research Questions

1. How do evolving nonverbal communication and cultural rituals influence the development of intercultural friendships over time?
2. How do these evolving practices contribute to the building of trust, empathy, and shared belonging among students from diverse cultural backgrounds?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural Friendships in University Contexts

International students' social integration and academic success depend on intercultural friendships. Intercultural friendships provide opportunities for intercultural learning, improve emotional well-being, and assist students in adjusting to new academic and social contexts (Jurések and Wawrosz, 2024; Wong and Liu, 2025). Given their pertinence in larger, multilingual, and multicultural contexts (e.g., Chinese universities), where growth in diversity is accelerating (Tang and Zhang, 2023), it becomes increasingly important for researchers to examine how intercultural friendships develop, deepen, and change over time. Despite research establishing the significance of intercultural friendships in facilitating social connection, little information is available about how deepening intercultural friendships occur.

Previous research has indicated that the dominant method for developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships involves verbal communication (Gudykunst and Kim, 2003). However, insufficient attention has been given to the failure to implement verbal modes of communication because of language barriers and cultural differences. In these scenarios, nonverbal modes of communication become paramount and should be regarded as a critical aspect of the development of intercultural friendships. Examples of situations where nonverbal modes of communication are paramount are found at Chinese universities; for example, Chinese communication styles are mediated by indirectness, relational sensitivity, and social harmony (Anjum et al., 2025). The majority of the literature, however, treats nonverbal communication as a fixed component of interaction, failing to examine how the meanings attributed to nonverbal behaviors change over the course of relationship development.

Nonverbal Communication and Ritual Practices in Intercultural Friendship

The utilization of nonverbal communication in a variety of different contexts, including but not limited to the use of gestures, facial expressions, silence, body language, and proxemics to aid in the creation of trust, the management of uncertainty, and the negotiation of interactions between people from different cultures, is highly important (Anjum et al., 2025; Li, 2025). In developing relationships between people from different cultures at the beginning stages of a friendship, where language skills may not be well developed, nonverbal communication is critical in communicating emotions, respect, and relational intent. In high-context cultures, for instance, China, the meanings of nonverbal behaviors, such as the use of silence and restraint through body language by one individual toward another, hold great significance for the relationship between those two individuals (Pang et al., 2024).

Recent studies illustrate how silence can serve as a means of managing emotions and promoting relationship stability while also providing an alternative means of protecting one's reputation when a relationship is confronted with conflict (Nakane, 2007; Wu et al., 2025). While there has been considerable research documenting the various usages of silence within an intercultural

context, emphasis in the literature is placed on the temporality of silence in addition to being contextual, leading to an assumption that the meaning of silence remains constant throughout time and across contexts. Similarly, shared ritualistic behaviors, such as communal eating, exchanging gifts, and other ceremonial activities, are important for demonstrating feelings of care within an intercultural friendship (De Hooge & Straeter, 2023; McNamara, 2024); however, they are often treated as static behaviors, disregarding the dynamic nature of their meanings and how these meanings evolve over time through the development of the friendship.

Research Gaps and the Need for a Longitudinal Perspective

While prior research has provided some insights into the role of nonverbal communication in intercultural friendships and the use of nonverbal communication in rituals, three significant gaps remain in the literature. First, there is a gap in understanding how the meaning attributed to nonverbal behaviors in the context of the same friendship may change over time. Much of the literature tends to conceptualize these types of behaviors in terms of their static quality and does not capture their function as a mechanism for managing initial uncertainty before they develop deeper levels of relational connection with one another. Second, the development of friendships between individuals from different cultural backgrounds tends to be underrepresented in the literature. Currently, much of the literature has focused on understanding nonverbal communication as an event or practice in and of itself without considering how these practices develop and evolve throughout different stages in the development of a relationship between two individuals. Finally, while the frameworks of symbolic interactionism, face-negotiation theory, and third-culture building provide valuable insights into this issue, none have adequately addressed the fact that nonverbal practices can shift temporally as the individuals involved develop their respective friendships.

To address the aforementioned knowledge gaps, this study examines nonverbal communication and cultural rituals in relation to intercultural friendships over time by adopting a longitudinal research design. The goal of this research is to provide researchers with an understanding of how friendship practices such as silencing, eating together, and exchanging gifts play a significant role in forming, adapting, and creating an environment of intercultural togetherness within intercultural friendships through the use of nonverbal communication and cultural rituals across a period of three semesters.

Theoretical Frameworks

The purpose of the current research study is to integrate three different but complementary frameworks (symbolic interactionism, face-negotiation theory, and third-culture building) to understand how nonverbal communication and cultural rituals develop as they occur during intercultural friendships. Collectively, these theories create a strong framework for understanding the changing meanings of nonverbal behaviors, the ways in which they serve to

preserve relational harmony, and the contribution of repeated interactions to the development of a collective intercultural space.

Symbolic interactionism

According to Blumer (1969), interactions form the basis of developing the meaning of things. Hence, the nonverbal cues (e.g., silence, gestures, and shared rituals) associated with the establishment of interfaith friendships do not have the same meaning throughout these processes but rather develop and are continually evolving because of the ongoing interactions between individuals. Although they begin with uncertainty, these cues evolve into shared meanings as people develop trust and familiarity. For instance, the silence shared as a result of an interaction between two people will likely be interpreted differently in the beginning than it will in the later stages of a friendship; no longer interpreted as awkward, it will be interpreted in terms of demonstrating respect and empathy for each other. The framework of symbolic interactionism provides a means for examining how nonverbal behaviors change between two people over time, making it well suited for research aimed at examining the evolving nature of interracial friendships.

Face-Negotiation Theory

Ting-Toomey's face-negotiation theory (1988) investigates how people use self-image and relational harmony as a way to manage their interactions with others, especially when indirect communication is used. Culturally, communication is considered highly significant in China, particularly in a university setting where individuals place great value on being aware of those around them. As a result, students at Chinese universities typically communicate indirectly. The nonverbal behaviors that start out as ways of avoiding conflict and maintaining face (e.g., silence, soft gestures) become an expression of care and emotional support as the relationship becomes deeper. Therefore, applying this theory in this context helps to further extend the application of the theory by emphasizing how nonverbal communication changes throughout the stages of friendship development.

Third-Culture Building

Third, culture-building theory involves building a shared relational space through ongoing interaction (Anjum et al., 2025). This theory is critical to understanding the development of intercultural friendships, as more than just two separate individuals develop a friendship on the basis of their different cultural identities; it also creates the basis for the development of a 'third culture' between the two individuals. The process of creating a 'third culture' takes time following the initial contact between two individuals from different cultural backgrounds and involves repeated use of nonverbal behaviors (e.g., sharing meals together and participating in rituals together) to allow the two individuals to negotiate an understanding of their respective cultural differences and to collectively build a new cultural space that goes beyond their previous identity. The process of creating a "third culture" evolves organically through continued interaction and is

documented throughout the course of the research study rather than as an immediate one-time outcome of their first contact.

Integrating the Frameworks

Together, the three frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of friendships across cultures. The framework of symbolic interactionism explains how the use of nonverbal communication develops meaning through repeated interactions. The framework of face-negotiation theory demonstrates the changing significance of nonverbal facework in relationships as it moves from the aspect of managing conflict to the aspect of providing relational support. The Third-Culture Building conceptual framework illustrates that the intercultural space is built through nonverbal communication in conjunction with cocreation, which results in the creation of a shared culture. The third-culture framework was analyzed through the interaction between three conceptual frameworks, and the results indicate that nonverbal communication is a dynamic and constantly evolving resource in the development of friendship.

METHOD

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore how nonverbal communication and culturally based ritual behaviors impact the development of intercultural friendships between international students and their Chinese peers at a single university through a longitudinal qualitative research design. Data collection occurred over three semesters (September 2022 to November 2023) and comprised three phases of data collection. This approach allowed monitoring changes in the meaning assigned to nonverbal behaviors and rituals as relationships progressed. The use of both verbal and nonverbal communication on several occasions throughout relationship development provided insight into the evolution of relational dynamics and communication patterns as intercultural friendships developed.

Participants and Recruitment

An investigation involving 50 subjects (25 each from both China and the outside) was completed, with various cultural backgrounds and varying expertise levels. The sample size is also reflective of the diversity of regional and international ethnic groups; thus, the study provides an extensive source of data and information concerning intercultural communication. Overall, the variety of geographical representation among the participants will serve to generate broad-based perspectives from many different cultural environments.

Participants were recruited from university communication channels, student networks, and researchers directly. All the participants needed to be currently enrolled at the university at the time of data collection and actively communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds. Thus, all the participants were actively engaged in developing intercultural friendships.

Data collection

Data were collected in 3 cycles (1 at the end of each semester) over a 14-month period. Each participant completed semistructured interviews using an identical interview guide across all three cycles. The purpose of the interviews was to determine the participants' experiences of nonverbal communication (silence, gestures, body language, eye contact, proxemics) as well as their cultural rituals (e.g., gift giving, sharing meals, participatory cultural activities) to identify and track continuity and change in the participants' experiences over time. Examples of interview questions include the following:

- "Can you describe a time when silence helped resolve a conflict or strengthen a friendship?"
- "How do you use body language to communicate with friends from different cultural backgrounds?"
- "Have you engaged in any shared rituals, such as cooking together or providing gifts, to build trust with your friends?"
- "How have your intercultural friendships evolved since the start of the semester, especially in terms of nonverbal communication?"

Participant observation was conducted by the researcher through the use of both participant observations and interviews. In total, 90 hours of participant observation were conducted over three semesters of the study. Both formal settings (classrooms/study groups) and informal settings (cafeterias/residence halls/social events) were utilized, as participant observation appeared to provide an opportunity for the researcher to observe spontaneous interactions and obtain useful context to accompany the interview data.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis method, as described by Braun & Clarke (2006), was employed for the purpose of analyzing the data. This method provides a flexible approach to identifying patterns and themes in your data and allows for an in-depth analysis of the development of those patterns and themes in relation to time.

The analysis proceeded in six stages:

1. **Familiarization with the data:** The interview transcripts and observation notes were read and reread several times to develop a thorough understanding of the data.
2. **Initial coding:** Inductive analysis was used to code the data via the identification of major segments related to the five master themes (nonverbal behaviors, cultural rituals/ceremonies, building trust, managing emotions, resolving conflict, adapting to another culture, and building relationships).
3. **Theme identification:** Codes were organized into larger themes to represent major aspects of participants' experiences from each of the three data collection points.
4. **Theme review:** The thematic analysis was conducted across all three data collection waves to identify patterns of continuity and change within the data.
5. **Participant feedback:** Participants in the third semester were asked to view the themes that had emerged among all three data collection waves to ensure

that the subsequent interpretations were accurate. Participant feedback was used in the final analysis to ensure that the findings accurately represented the participants' lived experiences.

6. **Comparative temporal analysis:** The data were analyzed through a temporal lens to examine how nonverbal communication and ritualistic behaviors changed over the course of each of the three semesters and how these changes were linked to the development of interpersonal friendships across cultures.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study:

- A longitudinal study design enabled repeated contact with the respondents over three semesters, allowing researchers to gain an understanding of how nonverbal communication and cultural rituals change across time.
- Methodological triangulation was employed using interviews and participatory observation as the means of gathering data so that the data gathered could provide a more diverse and richer amount of data and provide a better view of the data collected for the analysis.
- In the last stages of the analysis, the participants will need to respond to establish whether the themes represented their experiences; this will help enhance the credibility of the data.

Ethical Considerations

Research involving human subjects and IRB (DH24021) review and approval occurred prior to commencing this research project. Participants may withdraw from the research study at any time before, during, or after being contacted. Each participant in this study signed informed consent forms and was assigned a pseudonym throughout the process to maintain confidentiality. All the data collected in this study were maintained in a secure and reliable database, which used passwords for access.

This research was conducted in a manner that respected cultural considerations to minimize the likelihood of causing emotional distress during data collection or observation. The well-being of participants was a priority throughout the research. This study was supported by the National Social Science Fund of China (Grant No. 24AYY019).

RESULTS

The research described how nonverbal communication and shared rituals influence the intercultural relationships between international students and Chinese students over three semesters. The interviews were conducted with 50 participants (25 Chinese and 25 international) between September 2004 and November 2005. The five primary themes that were identified were (1) the changing effect of silence; (2) the building of trust through the use of shared ritual practices; (3) the role of nonverbal communication in the cultural adaptation process; (4) the gradual establishment of a common intercultural space; and (5)

the role of university support in establishing trust, empathy and a shared sense of belonging according to the data. A noticeable trend in the data were the change over time in the use of nonverbal practices. In the first semester, these practices were primarily used to reduce uncertainty and facilitate initial interactions; in the second semester, they were used to increase relationship development and support; and finally, in the third semester, they were used as markers for trust, empathy, and a shared sense of belonging.

1. Silence as Emotional Regulation and Relational Support

Throughout the three semesters of developing intercultural friendships, silence served as one of the most vital nonverbal ways to develop an intercultural friendship; however, the functions of silence changed during the semester. In the first semester, the role of silence was primarily to help manage uncertainty, decrease escalation, and provide a space for recovery from an emotionally intense interchange. Both Chinese and international students needed to learn how to interpret one another's ways of communicating; therefore, silence acted mainly as a way to cautiously and protectively respond to one another until it was determined what the other parties were intending in their conversation.

As an illustration, one of the participants from China provided insight into how they managed disagreements: "When we argued, we would stop talking for a while. This gave us both time to calm down and collect our thoughts before resuming the discussion." The same sentiment was echoed by an Indian participant who stated, "While initially I found this practice odd, after a short time, I realized that it was not uncomfortable; it was simply a demonstration of how to respect one another's feelings and to help prevent a disagreement from becoming more heated."

In the second semester, silence transitioned from an expression of conflict to one of mutual accommodation. People in the group began to see silence as a respectful delay rather than a sign of disengagement. In the third semester, silence evolved to take on a more emotional role, having been used as a means of demonstrating awareness, support, and comfort by being physically present, without needing to communicate through spoken language. One Nigerian man stated, "There are times when we can just be together in silence, and there is nothing awkward about it; we demonstrate our respect for one another's physical presence but do not need to express it through verbal means."

These research findings reflect a definitive change over time in the use of silence as a means of managing emotions (repressing) and avoiding conflict to provide one another with relational support and mutual understanding.

2. Shared Rituals as a Basis for Trust

Communal meals and exchanging gifts are two examples of shared rituals that help build trust among participants. The first semester involved these rituals to help create initial points of contact and close social distance among students; they provided an opportunity for students to interact with one another without having to rely on verbal fluency as a means of communicating. One participant from China stated, "When I invite you to join me for dinner at the time of the

Chinese New Year, what I am doing is inviting you to be a part of my culture. By sharing the meal with me, you are showing me your appreciation of my culture.”

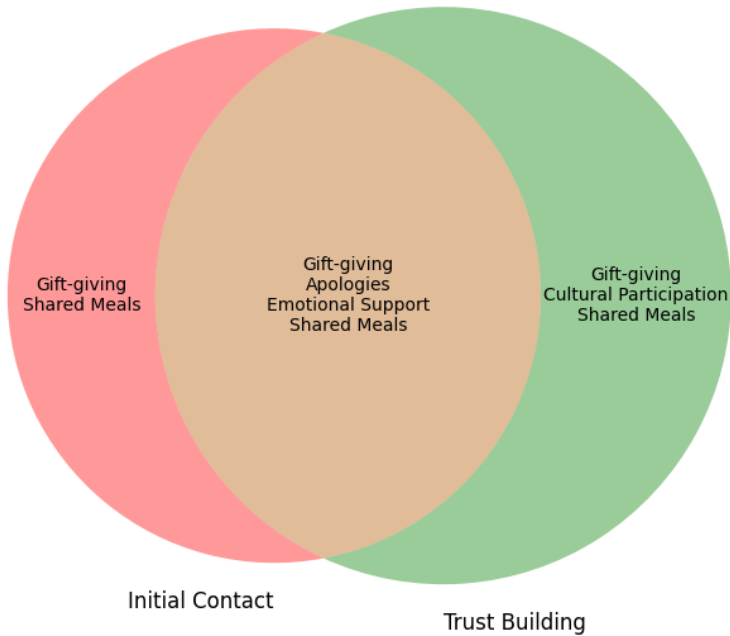
In the beginning, rituals served as the first steps in forming friendships; however, by the second term, they had transformed to be even more personal and relevant to us. “We not only eat together to participate in each other’s cultures; eating together became a way for us to show one another comfort, care, and emotional support;” for example, a participant from Germany stated, “That first meal we ate together, it represented a level of trust for us both, not just because we ate together.”

By the third semester, gifting had become a method in which tension could be repaired, apologies could be expressed, and the ties of emotional closeness could be reestablished following differences. One Moroccan participant, in particular, stated, “After I worked out the disagreement, I was having with my Chinese roommate, he gave me a small gift. It was simply his way of saying, ‘I want to repair the effect of that disagreement.’”

These practices, initially acts of inclusion, evolved into established expressions of trust, reciprocity, and emotional intimacy.

Figure 1: *Role of Shared Rituals in Trust Buildings across Stages of Intercultural Friendship*

The Role of Shared Rituals in Trust Building Across Stages



The visual representation of the Venn diagram depicts the development of intercultural friendships through shared rituals (gifting/wining and dining). The initial function of these rituals as 'entrances' into cultural exchange and the formation of social bonds gives way to a transition to ultimate forms of trust; they subsequently morph into deeper expressions of trust as sources of emotional support and provide appropriate outlets for repairing relationships over time.

3. Nonverbal Communication as a Process of Cultural Adaptation

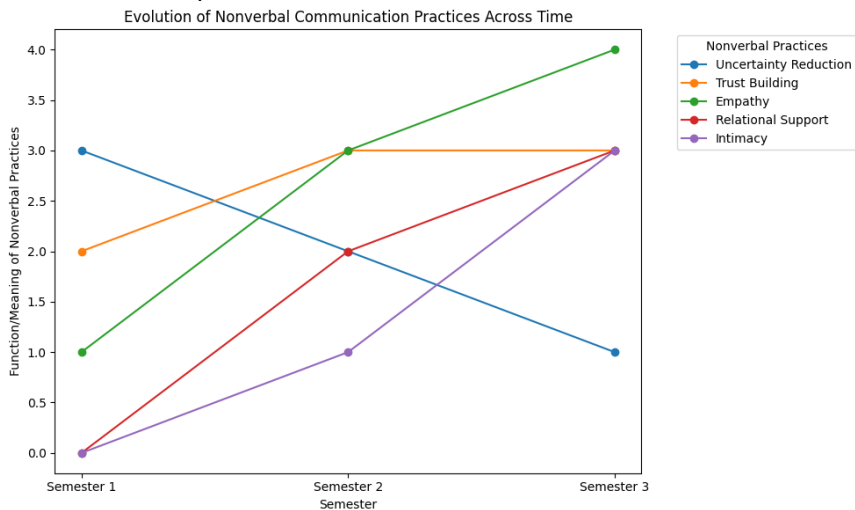
As a tool of adaptation for international students during the period of entering campus life, nonverbal communication was particularly important for supporting their journeys through culture shock. The participants in the study utilized many forms of nonverbal communication during their first semester on campus, including actions, expressions, posture, and physical distance from others. At this point in their development, students utilized nonverbal communication primarily as a method of connecting with others and reducing any potential miscommunication due to language barriers or a lack of understanding of social expectations associated with the university setting.

A participant from Russia remembered, "I would use hand gestures as well as facial expressions to convey my message; ultimately, my classmates in China could understand and read me simply by using my facial expressions." This is an important example of how nonverbal ways of communicating can assist students in coping with the immediate communication challenges they experience.

The exchanges became more reciprocal by the time these students reached the second semester; there was increased familiarity with each other's use of embodied communication (nonverbal) between both sets of students from China and from other countries. This greater familiarity among them reduced the reluctance of both groups of students to communicate and enhanced the level of confidence of both sets of students in doing so. In addition, what began as compensation for challenges experienced during the first semester became a common form of communication when students were in their second semester.

The difference in personal space demonstrates adaptation from the first semester, when students were aware of the difference in expected physical distance, and the two groups reported feeling uncomfortable and uncertain about how they were expected to behave. As both groups adjusted their behavior, by the third semester, they could discuss differences in their expectations and could do so with less tension; as a result, their nonverbal adaptation in friends had become commonplace rather than a point of contention.

Figure 2: Evolution of Nonverbal Communication Practices across Time in Intercultural Friendships



As shown in Figure 2, the function of silence changed from an emotion regulation strategy at the end of the first semester to a type of relational support (including nonverbal communication) to support the development of deeper relationships over the course of five semesters.

4. The Gradual Emergence of a Shared “Third Culture”

One pattern that emerged from the study was the gradual establishment of a common intercultural space that respondents called “our culture.” During the first semester, student interactions were primarily based on their own cultural frameworks and registered a high degree of awareness of cultural differences between classmates. Students reported that following multiple opportunities to participate in ritualized activities such as sharing food and celebrating holidays together during the second semester created intercultural practices that, while still retaining elements of both Chinese and international cultural heritage, were no longer entirely dependent on either culture.

After three semesters of participation in multiple repeat activities, a greater shared sense of identity was fostered among the participants. One participant shared, “We have created our culture from everything we do, and it is our culture, not one that is Chinese or one that is foreign.” This change illustrates a shift in the participants’ experiences from engaging with each other interculturally to working toward creating a relational space that is cocreated by individuals from multiple cultures.

Participants were able to retain distinctive aspects of their culture while feeling as though they belonged to a relational space that was collectively created by all individuals in the group. Evidence from this study shows that the development of the relational space was not an immediate or permanent event; it evolved through the participants’ continuous engagement with each other over

three semesters. Additionally, through shared ritual and the reinterpretation of nonverbal behaviors, the development of a relational space that the participants created occurred in stages.

5. Institutional Support as an Enabling Condition

Although university services and programs were not the main way friendships were formed, they facilitated friendships, especially during the initial adjustment phase. For example, participants described how university-organized events such as language exchanges, cultural festivals, and social mixers provided opportunities to interact in less intimidating environments, which made beginning new friendships easier during the first semester. As one Nigerian participant stated, “Interinstitutional activities allowed me to become closer to my Chinese friends.” In those casual settings, there was no anxiety over miscommunication caused by differences in the languages spoken.

Additionally, peer mentoring and culturally responsive advising were identified as beneficial tools for making sense of implicit rules and new social conduct. These types of assistance did not generate friendships per se, but they helped to establish the conditions under which nonverbal communication and mutual involvement could occur naturally.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine how nonverbal communication and the practice of rituals and culture as cultural practices affected the evolution of intercultural friendships between Chinese students in a foreign country and their international counterparts in three semesters. This study follows a chronological process of the evolution of meanings and purposes of nonverbal behaviors, which ultimately led to the evolution of trust, emotional intimacy, and a sense of belonging between friends of other cultures. Nonverbal communication (e.g., silence and body language) was originally employed to minimize the uncertainty between the two groups in forming friendships but eventually came to be associated with empathy and support. Similarly, rituals (e.g., eating together and exchanging gifts) were also used as a source of cultural exchange at the initial levels of friendship, whereas at the later part of the study, rituals became a symbol of trust, reciprocity, and emotional bond between the participants of the study.

This study contributes significantly to the field by focusing on the evolving nature of nonverbal communication throughout the lifespan of intercultural friendships as opposed to treating these interactions as existing in a vacuum. While contributing to what researchers already know about intercultural communication, the study also creates an opportunity for researchers to challenge current assumptions about intercultural interactions, which view nonverbal communication as static and therefore lack the capacity to develop beyond initial contact. Rather than representing universally applicable cues, nonverbal behavior should be viewed as dynamic throughout all stages of relationship development; hence, this study offers an enhanced understanding of nonverbal communication within intercultural settings.

Engagement with Literature

The current research provides an alternative position to most of the literature examining nonverbal communication as being static in nature. Nakane (2007) focused on how silence can help maintain relational harmony, but her work primarily discusses the immediate role of silence in communication. This research shows that silence can evolve from being used as a means of managing uncertainty to being used as a way of demonstrating support and empathy to others in a relationship. These findings also support symbolic interactionism theory, which posits that the meanings of social behaviors, including nonverbal communication, are created through interaction and that these meanings change as the relationship develops (Blumer, 1969). By viewing nonverbal communication in a dynamic manner, a greater understanding of how nonverbal communication evolves within intercultural friendships is achieved.

Face-Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 1988) typically emphasizes the role of nonverbal communication in maintaining one's personal identity and avoiding conflict (Ting-Toomey, 1988) and primarily does so in relation to indirect communication. This study expands upon the work of Ting-Toomey by providing evidence for a change in how nonverbal communication functions. Nonverbal communication (e.g., silence and gentle gestures) can function to support relational harmony but can also evolve as an individual's conflict resolution styles become less confrontational and more relational (e.g., emotional support). Documenting this temporal change adds complexity to face-negotiation theory, as it relates to the characteristics of nonverbal facework over time.

This research contributes to the literature on third-culture building, which proposes that the creation of a third culture or shared culture is not an instantaneous result of initial contact; rather, it develops gradually through the repetition of nonverbal behaviors over time. Prior research has concentrated on the collaborative effort of creating shared cultural space; however, this study further shows that third-culture development occurs over a longer time period and includes nonverbal rituals (e.g., sharing meals and giving gifts).

Implications for Practice

The results of this study indicate that nonverbal communication plays an important role in the formation of intercultural friendships; therefore, universities need to use it as a primary method for encouraging student participation. To accomplish this goal, they should provide their students with many chances to interact with each other in an informal way; these opportunities should also be structured so that students can freely express themselves through nonverbal cues. Examples of such opportunities include shared meals, group activities led by students (with guidance from faculty or staff), cultural events (e.g., festivals), and social mixers that allow for the creation of relational trust and understanding based on nonverbal behaviors.

In addition to hosting events on a single occasion, it is vital for universities to establish a long-term pattern of intercultural exchanges through ongoing opportunities for intercultural interaction. As shown in the research, repeated forms of contact have been proven to develop a sense of trust and emotional

intimacy between individuals over time. Therefore, it is important for universities to not only host one-time events but also create an atmosphere where students will be able to engage in informal, recurring types of nonverbal interactions. For instance, this long-term engagement is extremely beneficial when students are first starting to establish friendships, because they often do not desire to speak verbally with others, as the limitations of language are detrimental to effective social interaction.

Furthermore, student support services can use various methods to teach nonverbal communication skills through cross-cultural training programs. By helping students understand how to interpret instances of body language, silence, and other nonverbal cues between two cultures, universities make it easier for students to communicate with one another without misunderstanding and to communicate more smoothly.

Limitations and Future Research

This study provides valuable findings; however, several limitations should be reported. First, the qualitative sample size of 50 participants is appropriate for longitudinal analyses to show how experience changes over time, but it may not be indicative of experiences among all international students across their various institutions and cultural contexts. Future research studies should increase the number of participants from different contexts to determine whether the current findings are evident across a variety of settings.

In addition, the current research was completed at one university in China; therefore, it cannot be generalized to all Chinese universities or intercultural contexts. Future research should examine how local institutional culture, student composition, and communication patterns across multiple universities in China influence the creation of intercultural friendships.

Third, while the study tracked how individuals changed during the course of three semesters, the timeframe is limited to only one phase of university life. Future studies should extend beyond the university years to determine whether the patterns around the development of intercultural friendships continue to exist, diminish, or if and how they change after graduation and through different life transitions, such as changing jobs or pursuing further education.

Finally, this research primarily examined face-to-face interactions; however, numerous international relationships exist online using social networking technology. Future investigations may reveal the role that nonverbal indicators play (e.g., when responses are made, visual images associated with particular messages, how rituals are performed) in electronically mediated communications, as well as whether these electronic interactions aid or hinder the development of strong interpersonal connections.

Conclusion

Findings from the present study indicate that the process of developing intercultural friendships through nonverbal communication is dynamic rather than static. Over time, nonverbal communication, such as nonverbal cues of silence, body language, and shared rituals, has become increasingly important in the

development of trust, empathy, and social connectedness among intercultural friendships. The primary conclusion from the results of this research is that intercultural friendships develop as much through quotidian repetitive nonverbal communication as they do through verbal interaction.

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