



Stony Brook **University**

Why are Chinese students so quiet?

-- Interpreting Chinese Silence in American Classrooms

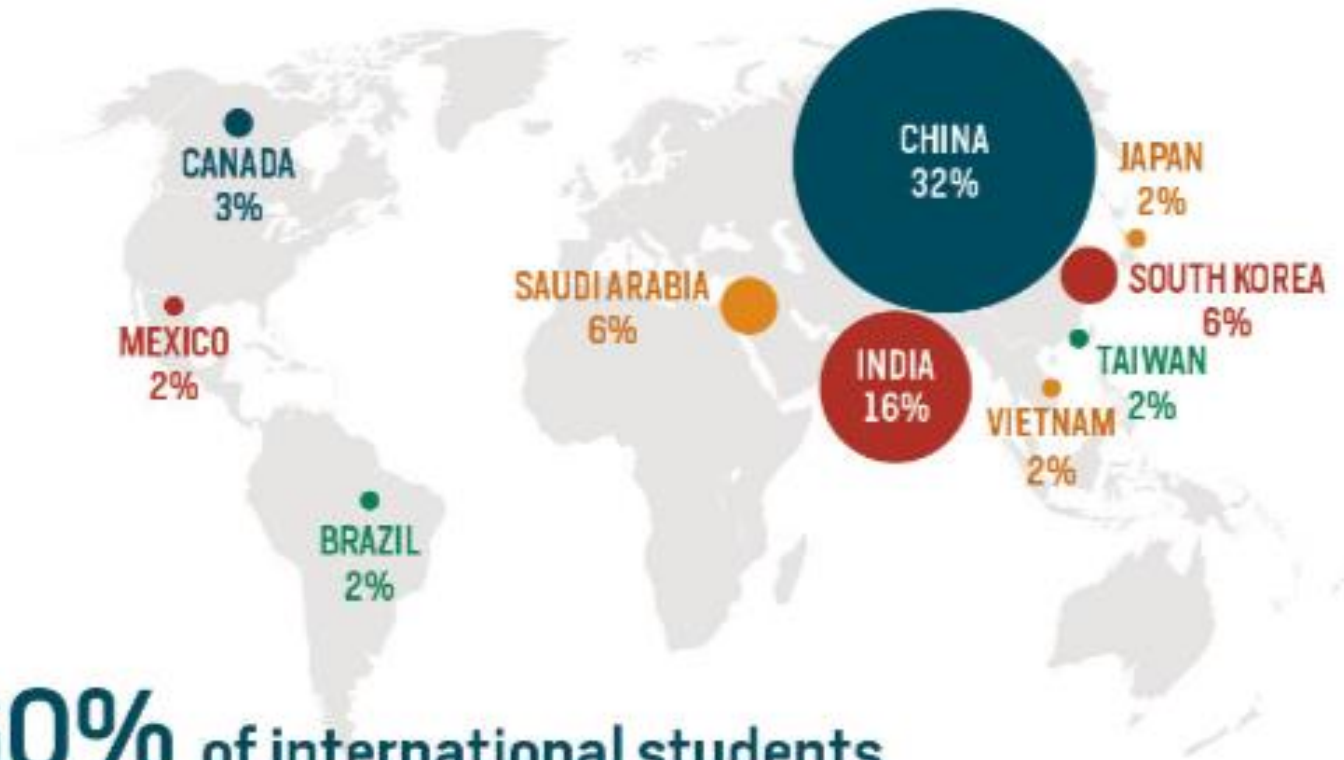
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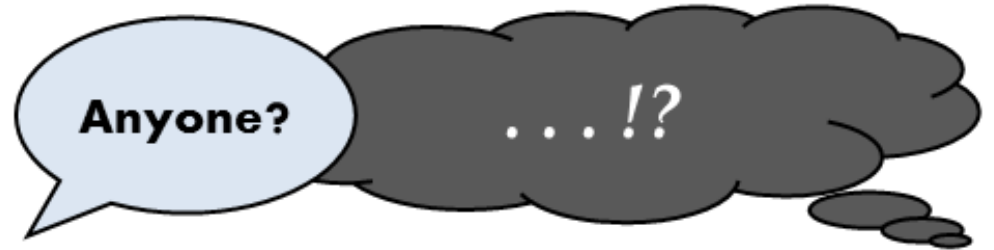
TOP TEN PLACES OF ORIGIN OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

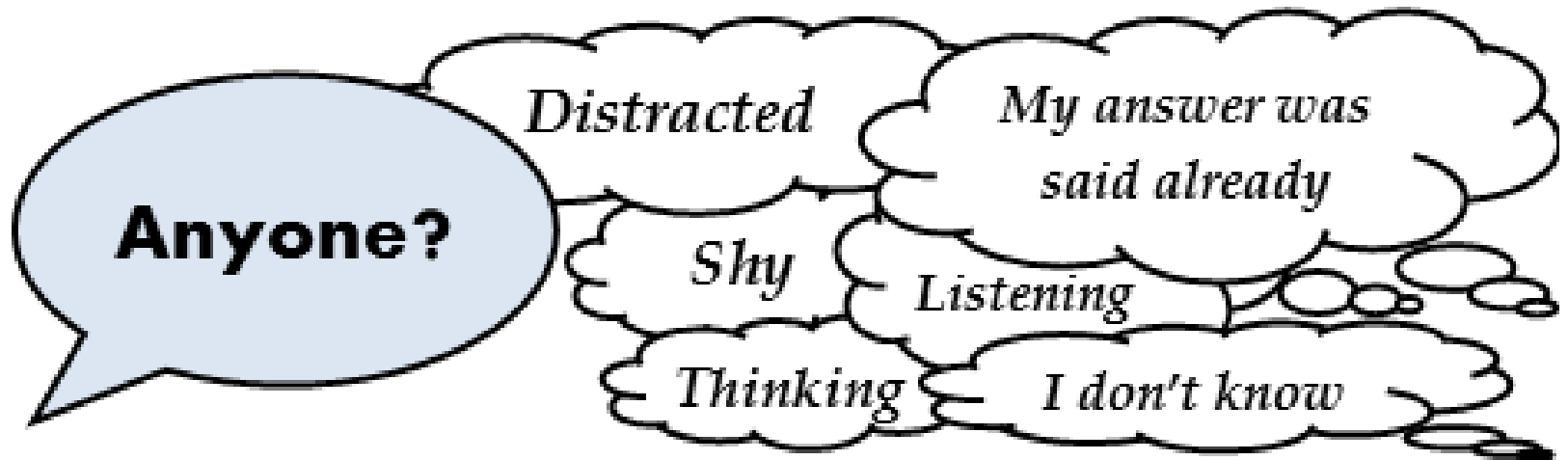


60% of international students
come from China, India, Saudi Arabia, and South Korea.

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The silence of Chinese students

- can express many things and
- can **NOT** be simply attributed to any single factor.

(Liu, 2001; Chang & Au, 2007)

Focus of this talk

- ❖ To understand Chinese students' silence in American classrooms
- ❖ To recommend interventions in helping Chinese students break silence

Theoretical framework of silence

Silence can be ambiguous.

Types of silence (Sobkowiak, 1997)

1. Refraining from speech
2. Absence of sound
2. Withholding knowledge
3. Failure to communicate
4. Oblivion or obscurity

Silence in Chinese Contexts

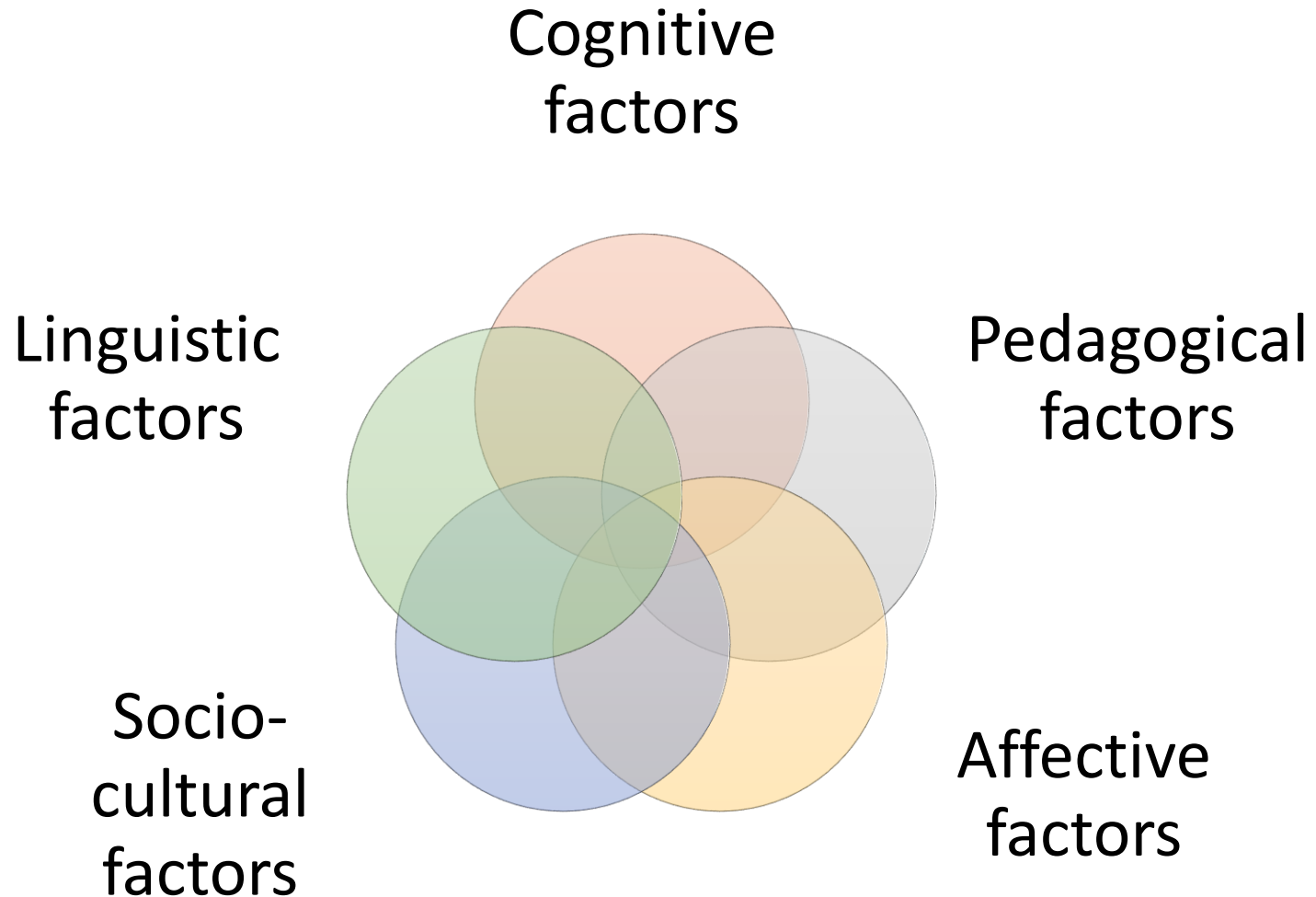
In Chinese contexts:

- Indication of students' attentive listening
- Indication of students' active thinking
- Shows respect for the teacher and appreciation of the high quality of the question.
- Means agreement and harmony with others' opinions.
- Respect for other classmates in classes with many students.
- Prevents committing mistakes
- Used as a shield of self protection as a minority group in the US.
- Allows internal processing of info at one's own pace.
- As a position to benefit from others' discussion without risking face due to lack of communicative competence or being seen as disagreeable.

In American context:

- Silence after a teacher asks a question may be perceived as negative and as a sign of disrespect to the teacher.
- May symbolize boring and uninteresting class

Five related factors



Cognitive factors

- Prior learning experience,
- background knowledge,
- Mental readiness

Pedagogical factors

- Teaching styles
- Participation as a course requirement
- Opportunities to speak up

Affective factors

- Anxiety
- Motivation
- Risk-taking

Sociocultural factors

- Values and beliefs in the role of the teacher and students
- Facework, showing respect for others by keeping silent
- Norm of being a good listener as a good student

Linguistic factors

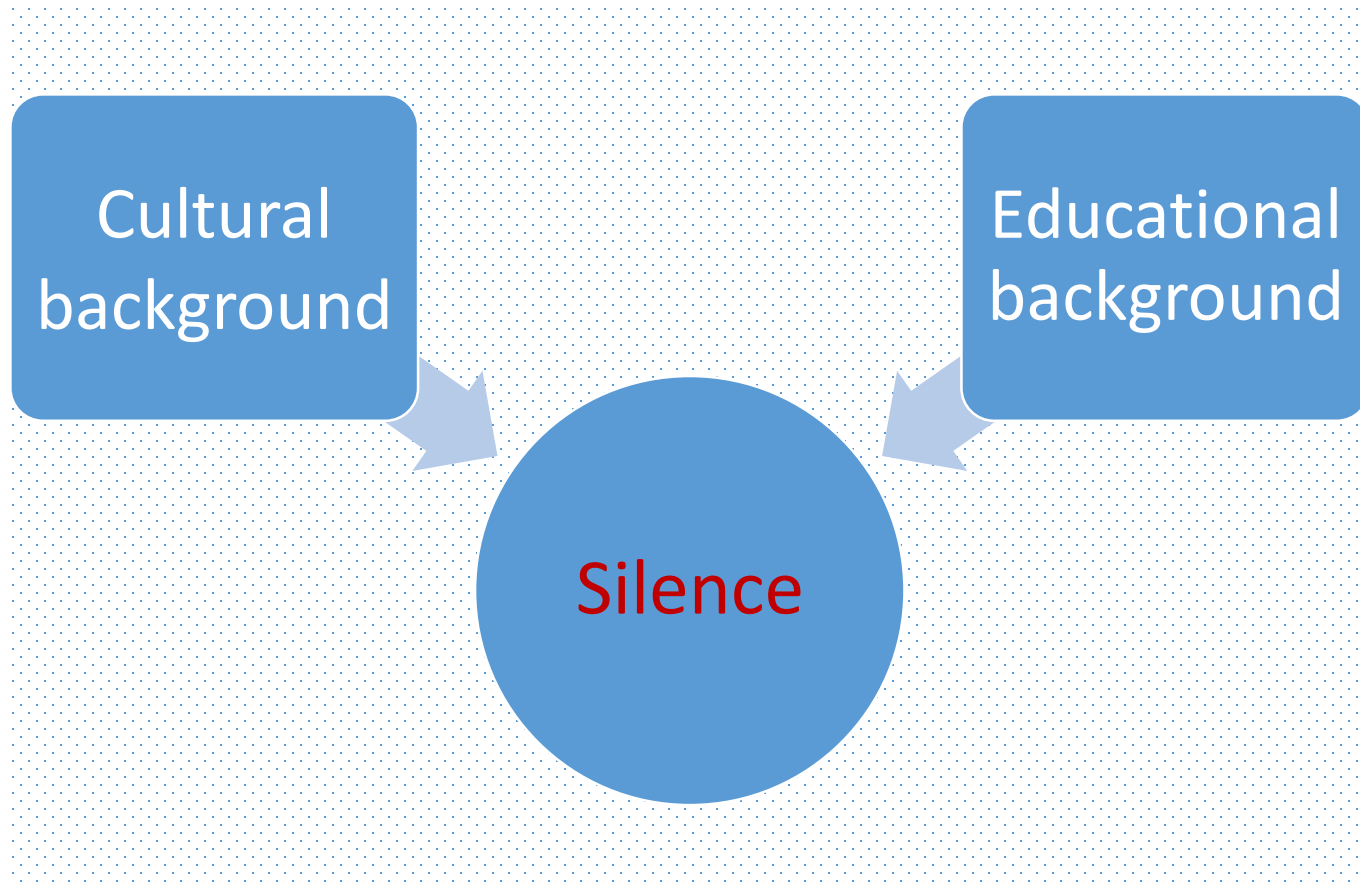
- Proficiency in the target language
- Communicative competence
- Accent

Functional levels of factors

Each factor in these five categories is operated at three functional levels:

- Facilitative
- Debilitating
- Neutral

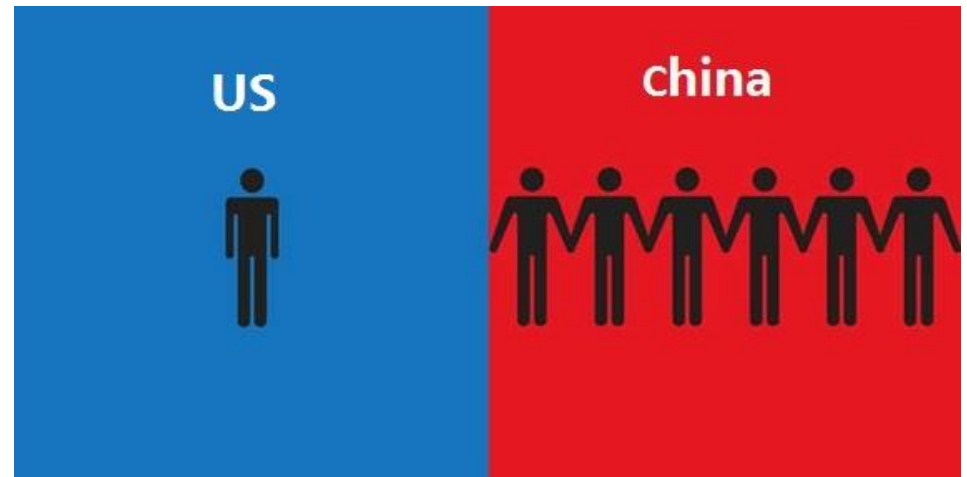
Interpretation: Two Main Internal factors



(1) Cultural background

❖ Collectivism

- deference to group harmony
- form groups
- stay within the group



Individualism vs. Collectivism
Illustration by Yang Liu

(1) Cultural background

❖ Face work

Giving face

not pointing out other's mistake is giving others face

Losing face

expressing ideas in front of a lot of people might cause losing face

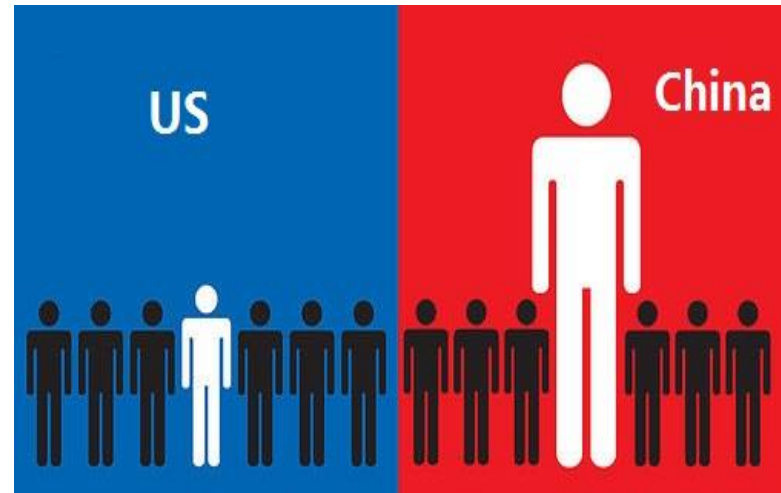
Saving face

stay quiet to not to humiliate in front of whole class is saving face

(Liu, 2001; Hu & Fell-Eisenkraft, 2003; Ha & Li, 2012; Lin, 2016)

(2) Silence inherited from education in China

- ❖ Over-reliance on teachers
- ❖ Dominant lecture style
- ❖ Show respect to teachers
- ❖ Knowledge vs. ability
- ❖ Learner vs. user



The role of a teacher in a
classroom

Illustration by Yang Liu

(2) Silence inherited from education in China

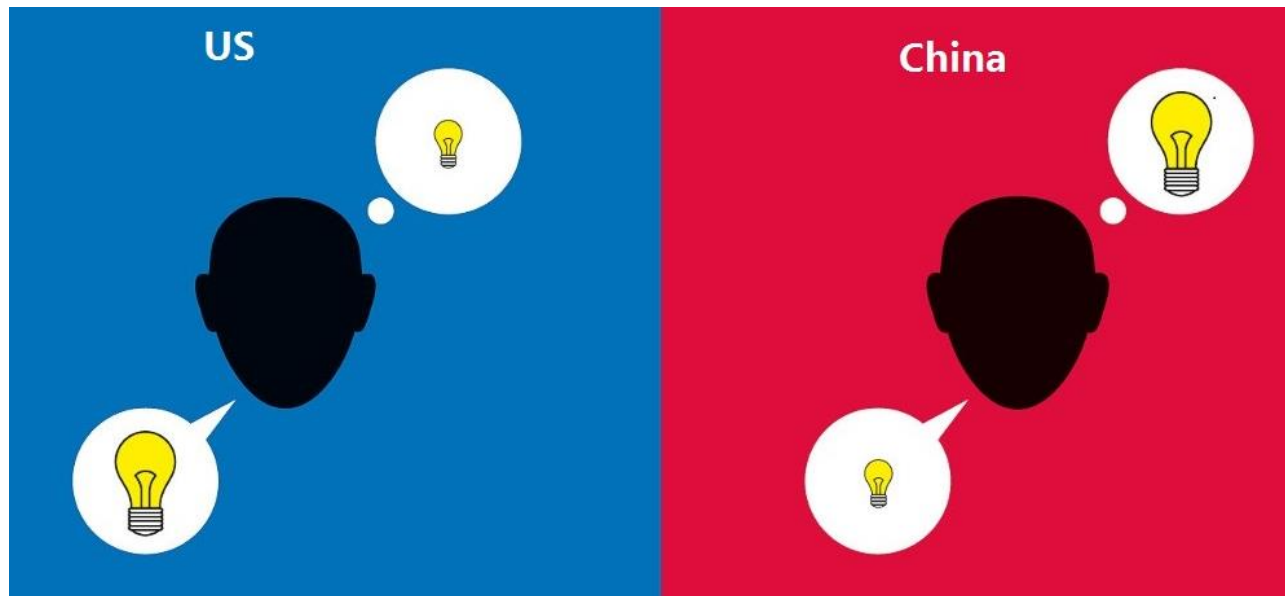
- ❖ Grades mean everything but not participation
- ❖ Resistant when forced
- ❖ The influence of class size



A pic of “gaokao”
(deccanchronicle.com)

(2) Silence inherited from education in China

- ❖ Know the answer too well to bother
- ❖ To avoid “show-off”



Self-portrayal
Illustration by Yang Liu

Interpretation: Two Main External Factors

- **Factor 1: Attitudes and Stereotypes**
- The Chinese students' silence is aggravated by the attitudes and stereotypes imposed on them as they are seen as passive learners.
- This may perpetuate the circle of silence.

Interpretation: Two Main External Factors

- **Factor 2: Teacher Factors**

- The lack of understanding of the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of Chinese students;
- Hesitancy in asking them to speak up in class for fear of making them uncomfortable;
- Stereotypical view of Chinese students as passive learners. This may lead them to become more accepting of the lack of participation of Chinese students than from other students.
- It may also impact those students who are in the process of developing confidence to speak up in class.

Deconstructing silence

-- *stepping out of the silence circle*

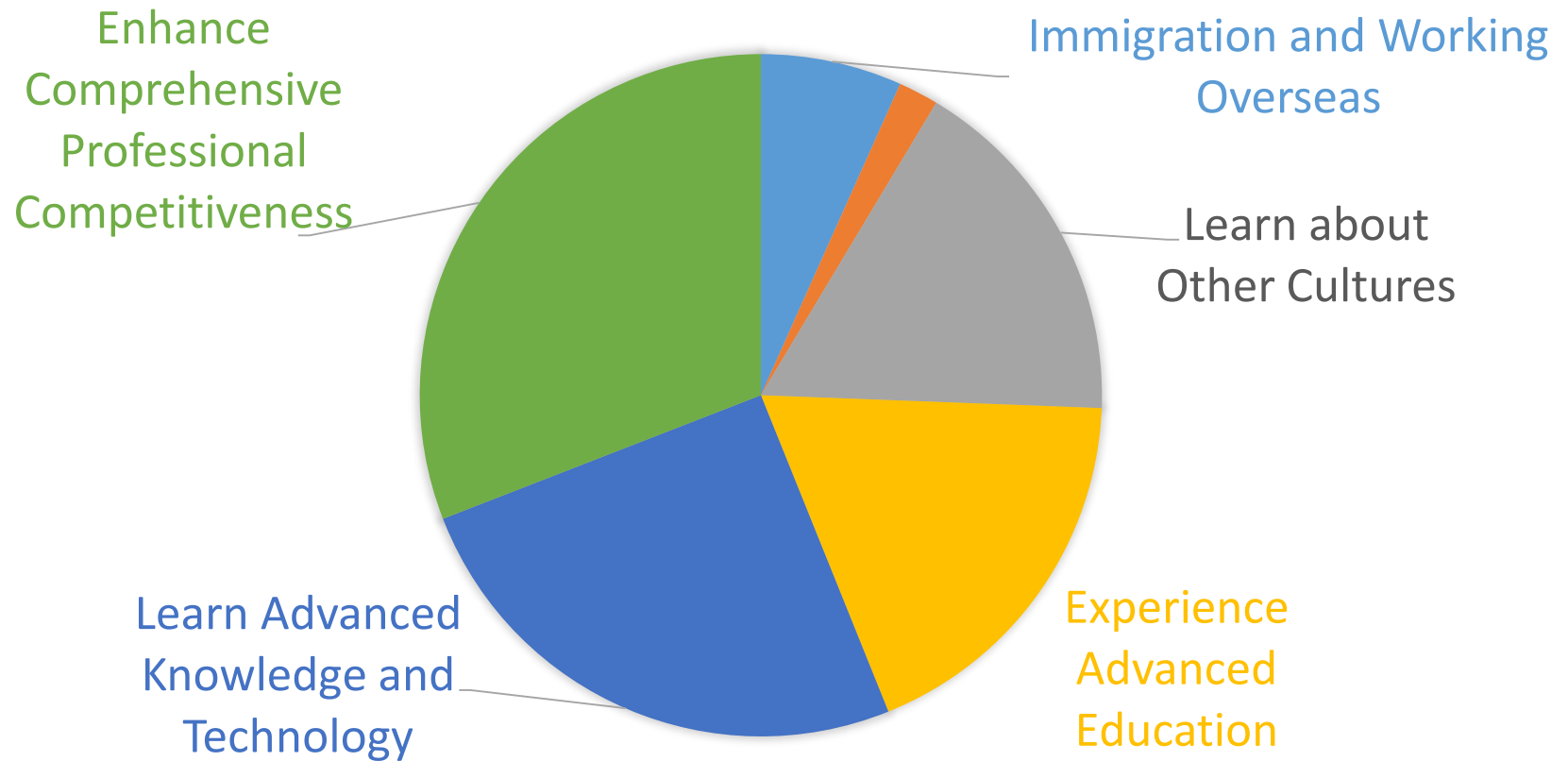
❖ ME-generation

- less shy and silent
- motivated to make changes
- try to seize every opportunity to excel at school

(Binkley, 2007; Ha & Li, 2012; Redden, 2014; Horton, 2016).



Top Reasons to Study Abroad for Chinese Undergraduate Students of 2015



(Wang & Lv, 2016) No.5

Interventions in helping Chinese students break silence

❖ For teachers

1. Seating arrangements
2. Grouping
3. Design of class activities (e.g., structured discussion)
4. Pedagogical approaches
 - Allow wait time to answer questions
 - Call on silent students first
 - discourage a few individuals dominate discussion
 - Make participation part of the course grade
 - positive reinforcement

❖ For American peers

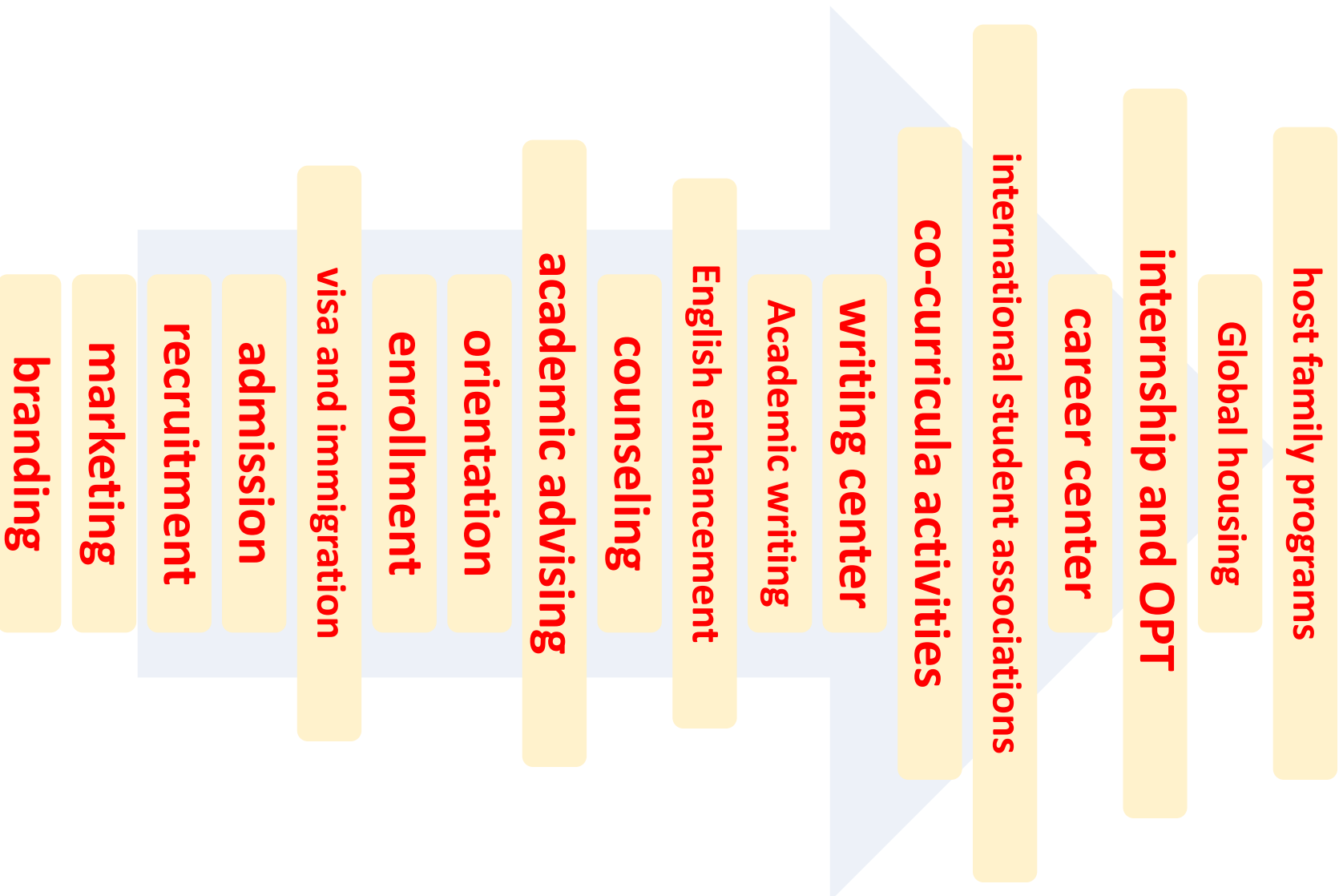
1. Be a good listener
2. Take the initiative to start a conversation
3. Build a cross-cultural friendship
4. Collaborate with international students in projects

❖ For administrators

1. Encourage local students to study abroad
2. Host more multicultural activities and events on campus
3. Organize more specific orientation programs and workshops for both students and faculty
4. Provide more support to international student associations
5. Establish one-stop service for international students success

❖ For institutions

1. Establish one-stop service for international students success
2. Far beyond recruitment ...



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Thank you !