Understanding Employee Silence in Chinese Organizations

Hongrui Ren

A Dissertation Submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business (Management)

2020

Faculty of Business, Economics & Law

Abstract

In every business organization, the employees put forward opinions, suggestions, and ideas based on their own knowledge and experience to augment efficiency and performance. Owing to some other reasons, the employees may at times resolve to conceal their true views and thoughts. The decision to hide their thoughts and views is referred to as employee silence. As in other organizations around the world, Chinese organizations have their share of employee silence which has in many ways contributed to low performance and output in organizational production. The thesis aims to deepen the understanding of employee silence and the reasons why most employees choose to remain silent. The study employs a thematic analysis in the evaluation of literature and other pieces of evidence about this topic. Primary data about employee silence are also collected through interviews in this research. Six participants working in different Chinese companies participated in the interview and provided critical answers to interview questions, constituting the basis of analysis in the findings. The findings indicate that employee silence of these participants has been influenced by fear, Chinese cultural values of absolute loyalty and respect to the superiors, and futility in the responses or actions desired. It is also found out that most participants are coerced to work silently out of the following concerns: fear of job losses, exclusions and fear of malicious responses from their superiors. These intrinsic and extrinsic factors force employees to remain silent. Employee silence creates a breakdown in effective communication which may result in conflicts. As such, it further leads to poor productivity of the employees and the organization at large.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgement), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

20 November 2020

Acknowledgement

I appreciate so many people for my dissertation. First, I heartily thank my primary supervisor Dr. Nimbus Staniland and secondary supervisor Dr. Tago Mharapara. Their serious working attitudes, open minds, and persuasive guidance help me a lot. When I was confused about my dissertation, they always helped sort out my ideas and guide me to revise on a clearer way. And the final dissertation was also striking one snag after another. I understood more about 'No pains, no gains' in the process of constantly improvement and revision. Thank you again, I have nothing to return your great kindness.

And I would like to thank my parents who are hard-working, wish their child to be excellent, and never ask for paying back, and I have finished my dissertation because of their love and support. Finally, I would like to thank all the participants who volunteered to participate in this research. Thank you for trusting me and being willing to share your experience and opinions with me. Thank you for your great contribution to this research.

1   CHAPTER 1: Introduction

The first chapter introduces the concept of employee silence, the causes of silence and how it affects the productivity of an organization. Then, a detailed problem statement that expounds further on the aim of this dissertation and the methodological approach is provided. The problem statement is followed by a set of research questions, guiding through the whole study. Here, it also offers the scope of the study and a summary of the research structure.

1.1   Background to the Study

Employee silence is an observable fact that most of employees prefer to keep their opinions or views (silence) whenever they encounter potential challenges within the organizations where they work (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). It is common for some employees to give feedback to managers of organizations because they do not fear being held accountable due to their divergent opinions; while others are afraid to leave a negative impression of speaking up their true views. From the point of organizations, if the frontline employees directly involving with customers choose to keep silent, the consequences can be grave (Fuller, 2007). For example, employees with silenced behaviour also have reduced job initiative and involvement (He, 2009). Recently, many researchers have researched on the employee's silent behaviour. It is unfavourable for organizational bottom-up information communication and exchange and quality of top leaders' decisions, due to the latter group's lack of sympathy to the development and interests of the organization. In addition, it decreases employees' work eagerness and contentment as a result of influencing the growth of their profession. Though from different standpoints, the common conclusion from various studies is that national cultural environment has an impact on employee silence, particularly in the case of Chinese employees. To be specific, Chinese traditional culture and thoughts will aggravate silent employees' behaviours (Li, 2012). The ultimate results of employee silence can be devastating to processes changing and decision making, which may further result in destructive results from the employees including cognitive dissonance reluctance to follow the regulations and rules, and sense of being undervalued by the organizations. Therefore, in order to dispel employee silence, Morrison and Milliken (2000) propose that organizational managers, supervisors and other leaders should employ decision making procedures that makes it

possible for the employees to contribute their ideas, view their inputs positively, and enable the employees to understand that their inputs are not just accepted but are expected by the organization. By employing such decision-making procedures, the organizations will be able to increase the employees' feelings of satisfaction and agency.

According to Wang (2012), almost all people's decision making and daily behaviour are related to their psychological prospects, built upon empirical experience. Silence is the behaviour of employees, thus their decision to keep silent must be associated with their psychological expectations, which rely on their assessments of personal abilities and external surroundings. On one hand, their evaluation of personal abilities is linked with their judgment whether their efforts can make a difference. When their intended aims cannot be achieved, they will choose to be silent (Anderson, John, & Keltner, 2012). On the other hand, external factors count in employees' silence. For instance, Parker et al. (2003) claimed that ethical climate could be defined as common conceptions among members within the firm. People are often affected by the ethical climate, the external environment, when they make decisions.

Recently, the idea of employee silence as consequential beyond merely a lack of voice has come to be perceived as a fundamental area of research in its own right (Milliken & Morrison, 2003). It is the desire to employ silence as a way of satisfying an underlying intention that distinguishes employee silence from silence related with simply a lack of voice. Correspondingly, silence due to lack of what to say, or the innate pauses entrenched in characteristic verbal communication do not comprise forms of employee silence since they also lack this feature of motive-driven intentionality. Studying and conceptualizing employee silence as a separate observable behaviour, driven by explicit motivation, and not just the lack of voice is essential due to the observable behaviour. Employee silence is a deliberate behaviour. It can be based on an assortment of motivations, which can be extensive and complicated, and not adequately accounted for when considered simply as a lack of voice. Consequently, there is a possibility that there are intentions for employee silence that are different from an opposite of, or absence of, motives for voice.

Nunnally (1978) posited clear articulation and the perceptions of boundary conditions are essential for sound empirical research. As a result, plainly communicating what does and doesn't entail employee silence is a fundamental step if the study is to be conducted systematically. Except that, a productive comprehension of this concept calls for a deeper look. Various scholars have

perceived employee silence as taking place in reaction to an assortment of issues (e.g., ideas for improvement, ethical issue, and fairness concern, etc.), focused on different targets, encompassing the authorities outside the organization, subordinates, co-workers, and supervisors.

Moreover, as much as employee silence has been perceived as a deliberate behaviour, illustrating that the behaviour itself disassociated from its primary reasons (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Some scholars have resolved to derive logic from the numerous reasons for employee silence by conceptualizing it as a multi-dimensional construct based on a range of basic motives, such as impression management, agreement, self-protection, cause harm and to be pro-social. Milliken et al. (2003) believed that the reasons for employee silence might be relative to the pro-social, self-protect, acquiescence, and impression management dimensions.

Milliken et al. (2003) point out that employees frequently feel reluctant to publicly express themselves on issues affecting the organization. This is typical for Chinese employees in Chinese organizations. Traditionally, China has been known to be a high-power distance civilization. Ordinarily, the general social construct is founded on individual allegiance and submission to superior power (Bond & Hwang, 1987). Speaking up on matters pertaining to work is perceived as a danger to managerial accord and defiance to authority of the leaders. The involvement of personal risk makes employees to feel hesitant towards voice in lots of circumstances. According to a study based on 73 companies in Zhejiang, only 26.8% of the organizations incorporated employee got involved in the scheme. About 57.7 % of the employees said that they did not regularly speak up, and about 28.1% of the employees never made any proposals (Xie & Yang, 2006).

Consistent with such findings, ways of motivating employee participation and voice was outlined as a fundamental undertaking in strategic human resource management for Chinese organizations (Liang, 2008). As a result, an empirical study aiming at the formation of constructive organizational atmosphere for employee creativity and voice is both practically and theoretically essential. The current research in China is not effective in studying how to motivate employees to give a voice to the organization and the reasons for employee' silence from the perspective of organizational human management. In another word, most research on this topic is conducted with western organizations rather than focusing on Chinese organizations.

Drawing from previous literatures on employee silence, this study examines the contextual and individual factors affecting the employee silence among Chinese employees in Chinese organizations. In the contemporary venture, seeing employees giving positive reports to managers of business organizations has become very common because these employees do not dare to express their genuine opinions or fear being held accountable due to the fear that their divergent opinions would offend the manager or the supervisor; other employees are not able to express their thoughts or views in the debate as they fear of being referred to as negative. When encountering these issues, some employees evidently have ideas that can develop the organizational performance, but they would rather be quiet to their lack of sympathy to the development and interests the organization. This situation could be unfavourable for organizational bottom-up information communication and exchange and minimized the quality of top leaders' decisions; besides, it decreases employees' work eagerness and contentment as a result of influencing the growth of their profession. Therefore, the silence behaviour of workers has garnered extra interest from researchers both internationally and domestically.

1.2   Problem Statement

Due to the swift changes in business and technological environments, many business organizations around the world have come to believe that employees are very useful assets, not just for their material labour, but also due their ground-breaking ideas (Janowski, 2015). Ideas by employee are very vital for organizations since it is the individuals within the firms that fashion diversity in the team of premeditated ideas. Kramer (2009) demonstrated that failure to communicate new ideas within an organization makes it challenging to convert imaginative ideas into innovative methods, and procedures, and products.

Milliken (2003) established in their recent quantitative research that 85 percent of employees reported that on a minimum of one or more occasions they developed the feeling that they were not in a position to present fundamental issues to their managers. Even though apparently a persistent occurrence, lots of essential issues have remained unanswered. For instance, what the main reasons for employee silence are, and how it should be addressed in accordance with local conditions. Consequently, this study analytically examines the different contributing factors to employee silence in Chinese organizations and represents fundamental step in developing an in-depth understanding of this significant phenomenon.

The collection of data for this research employed a thematic analysis in the evaluation of different pieces of primary and secondary literature material. This research made use of interview questions administered to six Chinese employees working in China. Their responses to the interview questions were thematically analyzed in the findings section and later discussed to get conclusions as of solutions to employee silence in Chinese context.

1.3 Research Questions

Based on the concept of employee silence within organizations and information generated from the experiences of six Chinese employees working in China, this study aims to provide answers as to the following two questions:

i.   What are the reasons for employees to remain silent in Chinese organizations?

ii.   What are the personal consequences for Chinese employees who choose to remain silent?

1.4 Structure of Dissertation

Chapter One: Introduction – This section provides an introduction to the thesis and the concept of employee silence in Chinese organizations. It offers a reliable background to the topic that further helps in generating the problem statement and the research questions.

Chapter Two: Literature Review – The literature review offers a detailed explanation of employee silence from an evaluation of information from previously written studies. This chapter puts focus on the interpretation of employee silence from the eastern and western understanding. It also offers the research gap that direct the rest of the study.

Chapter Three: Methodology – This part outlines the methodological approach used in this research during collecting of data. To be specific, thematic analysis is used in evaluating literature materials and interview responses from six Chinese employees.

Chapter Four: Findings – These findings are squarely based on the responses of the six interviewees, indicating that the themes of fear, Chinese cultural values of absolute loyalty and respect to the superiors, and futility in communication all lead to employee silence.

Chapter Five: Discussion – This chapter discusses themes with theories and deep insights from the literature review, including two established theoretical frameworks, namely, Hofstede's power distance and Exit-Voice-Loyalty-Neglect Framework.

Chapter Six: Conclusion – This part comprises of summaries of the whole research, especially of the evidence of employee silence. Three key reasons about why employees stay silent and two ways of how they keep silent are identified in the Chinese organizations.

2 CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter demonstrates the definition of employee silence in Chinese firms, and the idea of employee silence and voice within Western (USA) and Eastern (China) organizations. By understanding national and organizational culture differences, it provides pieces of evidence from the literature that showcase why employees from both the USA and China may choose to be silent over crucial issues that affect them to avoid negative consequences within organizations. Through comparison with western employee silence, the phenomenon within Chinese organizations can be better understood from cultural perspectives. Based on the above information, this chapter enables the readers to understand how Chinese employee silence affects their productivity and overall organizational performance, and the study also explores the various factors contributing to employee silence within Chinese organizations.

2.2 Definitions of Employee Silence

Effective communication is a crucial tool in proper employee management and organizational productivity. At times, appropriate lines of communication may be broken due to various factors. In most cases, when employees fail to channel out their views, management problems can arise in the organization. Not openly communicating whatever is on the employee's mind equates to employee silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Employee silence is the choice of employees to withhold their opinions or suggestions about crucial discussions rather than the issues affecting them within the workplace (Perlow & Repenning, 2009). Employee silence can be described as employees' choice not to openly air out their views, concerns, or rather grievances to their bosses or supervisors. Employee silence can also be indicated from their choice to forfeit participation in critical meetings over the fear of subjectification (Greenberg & Edwards, 2009). Employee silence poses a problem within the workplace that needs to be figured out urgently (Donaghey, Cullinane, Dundon& Wilkinson, 2011).

Employee silence may be intentional or forced. Pinder and Harlos (2001) evaluate the two sides of employee silence, including acquiescent and quiescent silence. They define acquiescent silence as deliberate or intentional by the employee who perceives that his or her influence may be too inferior; thus, they choose to remain silent (Rhee, Dedahanov & Lee, 2014). Quiescent silence

relates to forced employee silence due to fear of conflicts in the workplace or infringement from a colleague or superior (Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Rhee, Dedahanov & Lee, 2014). For instance, an employee may choose to withhold from communicating bad information to evade such negative consequences as personal distress, which could be induced by the unenthusiastic reactions of the receiver. This type of employee silence doesn't necessarily have to be consciously evoked. Tangirala and Ramanujam (2005) add that employees intentionally choose to withhold information, opinions, or suggestions for critical matters partnering their jobs for personal gains or rather individual fears (Dyne et al., 2003). Forced silence has mainly been propelled by fear.

Chinese scholars have also developed definitions of employee silence. For example, Zheng (2008) divided employee silence into three dimensions: acquiescent, defensive and indifferent. He believes that acquiescent silence is when employees think that what they do cannot change the status and therefore they passively retain their views. Defensive silence is because they are afraid that their opinions will offend others and indifferent silence is because they do not identify enough with the organization to seek change. Ma (2010) defined employee silence based on "4w" (What is the form? What is the problem of silence? Silence to whom? Whose silence?). Employees (grassroots managers or employees) could have presented ideas, suggestions, and information which can be instrumental in attaining organizational goals to people inside and outside the organization; however, due to other factors, they resolve to hold back their opinions and exaggerate filter or refine them (Ma, 2010). Liu *et al* (2017) argue that employee silence is a situation in which employees are under psychological pressure within an organization and dare not express their views directly. Xu et al argue that employee silence is when employees know that there are problems within the organization, but still will not make voice to such problems personally. Cheng and Zheng (2008) argue that silence is common among Chinese employees, who often choose to hide their views, remain silent, or simply echo their leaders and colleagues when the organization needs them.

2.3 Employee Silence in Western Organizations

2.3.1 Organizational Culture

A company's culture may affect the communication behaviours of an employee. It is argued that the interaction of employees with their colleagues is predetermined by the set organizational

culture. For instance, if the organization offers limited democracy in decision making, then there is due to be communication breakdown, especially on the lower level of the organizational hierarchy (Greenberg & Edwards, 2009). In such a case, most employees choose to remain silent so that they protect their jobs. According to Ma (2010), employees are unwilling to share information that may be perceived as intimidating or off-putting to those in higher ranks in a managerial hierarchy. When considered from an employee's point of view, it may be sensible to stay silent especially when the employee is afraid (fear) of his or her manager's possible reactions to the upward communication of interests and may further react by taking steps that demoralize the ability of the employee to work in the organization. Madrid and Leiva (2014) also point out that negative emotional states often occur in organizations. So information may be withheld by the employees to prevent conflict or not to rock the boat. Consequently, silence by an employee can be concluded as reluctance of communicating upward about certain issues or problems (Meyerson, 2001).

The consequence of employee silence is defined by relevant studies. Tamuz (2001) asserts that this unwillingness to share information and the silence or reluctance to speak has the prospective to destabilize organizational judgment and the ability to correct mistakes, thereby damaging employee morale and trust. A relevant example of these dynamics, which demonstrates the damage that employee silence can do to organizations is Enron. According to news reports, many Enron employees had complaints about the company's operations under the table but were reluctant to share with their managers about these concerns (Oppel, 2002). None of them were willing to publicly voice these complaints within the organization, but collectively chose to remain silent, which eventually led to the disintegration of Enron. This proves the side effect of employee silence on the organization, further confirming the importance of exploring the reasons for employee silence to solve this dilemma.

2.3.2 Manager-Subordinate Relationships within Western Organizations

According to Zhao (2012), at times, employees may decide to be silent about their concerns due to what has been termed by psychologists as the "mum effect". Studies on mum's effect indicate that people have a collective unwillingness to express negative information due to the embarrassment of being the communicator of lousy news (Greenberg & Edwards, 2009). In western organizations, there is proof that employees are mainly not comfortable relaying

information about possible issues to those above them. For instance, studies by Huang et al. (2005) have indicated that western employees misrepresent the information that they communicate to their superiors, relating upward in a manner that curtails negative information. Therefore, misrepresentation of information constitutes another form of employee silence in the western cultures.

The hierarchical relationship between the employees and their managers seems to strengthen the mum effect. Milliken et al. (2003) pointed out that organizing groups into hierarchies by design establishes restrictions against free communication, predominantly preventing disapprovals by low-status subordinates toward those in higher ranks. A study by Knoll and Van Dick. (2013) proposes that this is a type of instrumental, self-defensive behaviour. It seems that subordinates' employees may probably sort information that they communicate to their superiors to avoid conflicts and risks with their manager (Van Dyne et al., 2003).

Morrison (2011) points out in his research on organizational learning that there exist defensive routines and influential standards within organizations that usually hinder workers from speaking out their minds. Researchers opted to explore aspects that may enable individuals to develop their supervisors' willingness to sell ideas or communicate up in the hierarchies. For instance, Morrison & Milliken (2000) established that employees' inclination to share work-related issues and propositions to their managers rely on how friendly and receptive they profess their managers to be. This study result is in agreement with the viewpoint of Paksirat and Taheri (2018). Re-evaluation of earlier research helps to make it clears that upward communication is influenced not only by the organizational context, the messenger, and the characteristics of the communicator, but also by features of the manager-subordinate relationship.

According to Dutton et al. (2002), a study on issue selling has emphasized that subordinates decide whether to raise premeditated questions to their supervisors by "reading the situation" for evidence regarding "situation favourability". A favourable situation is portrayed as one where top organizational leader are seen as individuals who are ready to listen, the culture is generally perceived as accommodating, and there is comparatively modest ambiguity or risk of adverse penalties (Dutton et al., 2002). Ma (2010) posits that perceived situational favourability is also affected by other factors. Therefore, the willingness to participate in issue selling is influenced by alleged organizational norms, support, and the eminence of an individual's relationship with top

managers. While studies on issue selling emphasize the resolution to bring up a specific strategic issue, it also proposes that employees may decide to stay silent about problems if they determine that the context is not favourable.

Both fear and "mum effect" contribute to employees' unwillingness to open up and share information with the organizational managers in the West.

2.4   Eastern (Chinese) Employee Silence

2.4.1   Cultural Differences in Chinese Organization

Eastern employees do not always express their personal opinions and are often blamed by their employees for being unwilling to express their concerns in group meetings, both informally and formally (Huang et al., 2003). Their pace of turn-taking and conversation is highly culture-dependent. For instance, in quite a number of the Eastern Asian cultures, individual waits for the others to finish their thoughts, at times, it takes some time to comprehend it before responding (Yao, Deng & Zheng, 2009). Such a slow pace of conversation is a sign of respect for the others involved in the conversation and also enables one to reflect and come up with the most appropriate response. According to Yao, Deng and Zheng (2009), maintaining silence makes it possible for individuals to comprehend issues before reacting as opposed to thinking aloud. This has an impact on employee silence because in many occasions, one may be willing to contribute their ideas or provide response in a discussion, they may finally end up taking a lot of time contemplating whether to give out their thoughts or not. The ultimate consequence is a discussion may end up with very few individuals giving their opinions, while actually a majority or everyone could have contributed their thoughts (Yao, Deng & Zheng, 2009). Therefore, this slow pace of conversation is a reason for employee silence.

Furthermore, what is considered fundamental leadership behaviour in one context may be different in another regard. In Anglo-Saxon cultures, organizational managers and other leaders are perceived as individuals in superior positions and have the responsibility to manage a process. However, some eastern Asian employees may not take the initiative as they perceive leadership as a significant culture-dependent process (Warner, 2004). To make it clear, eastern employees are required to take personal efforts only within the frame of instructions given (Yan, 2012). In most Eastern Asian countries, for example, China, organizational managers are perceived as people who

provide instructions to employees responsible for execution. Therefore, because employees are expected to execute duties as instructed by their managers, they may carry out its tasks, even when they believe them to be wrong. This is one consequence of employee silence that can be harmful for the organization. Consequently, employees are expected to do as their managers and supervisors tell them without questioning whether something is wrong or right. Since questioning to the top leadership may lead to conflict, employees often choose to conceal their concerns and ideas, thereby resulting in occasional organizational output loss and reduced morale among employees who do not get the chance to key in their interests (Yan, 2012). In other words, in the eastern cultures, employee's submissiveness for the superiors and willingness to follow the instructions strictly is a contributing factor to the employee silence and the ultimate underperformance in an organization.

In addition, Chinese employees may also choose silence due to their traditional cultural education. Many Chinese employees are raised to be modest, and they are told that speaking less is a traditional virtue. Chinese traditional culture and Confucian culture, after more than 2000 years of development, have penetrated into Chinese life, playing an important role in shaping the growth of personal character in China. One of the character concepts most advocated by Confucian culture is to advocate that people should learn and value harmony. With that in mind, Chinese individuals may likely form a character which doesn't like to quarrel with others, seeking moderation within a group, and thus may be careful to keep silent as much as possible (Chen & Zheng, 2008).

Another reason suggested for employee silence in China is lack of self-initiative. What might be called a lack of self-initiative from Western perspectives is seen as an indication of respect paid to the managers and not a sign of incompetence as perceived by others (Ma, 2010). However, lack of self-initiative contributes to employee silence because when an employee is unable to come up with ideas by themselves, they resolve to giving-in everything other employees and managers say. Due to their low self-initiative ability they feel inadequate to take action and stand up for what they want in the organization (Lee, 2019). Put it differently, because such employees are afraid to show that they lack the ability to take action and correct mistakes in the organization, they resolve to keeping silent because if the managers learn of their weaknesses, they may end up being humiliated or losing their jobs (Yan, 2012).

2.5   Chapter Summary

Employee silence continues to be a critical organizational issue. This chapter identifies that employee silence prevents from effective communication. Detailed issues of employee silence are discussed in two different geographical regions, that is, the western region represented by the United States and the eastern region represented by China. From the review, the aspect of organizational culture or societal culture does affect the communication of employees. In western organization, employee silence is the result mostly out of the culture of the organization and the manager-subordinate relationships. In China, their traditional culture affects organizational cultures, whereby employees are expected to behave as the society dictates. Three specific reasons are explored here, including a slow pace of conversation, employees' unconditional submissiveness to superiors and employees' lack of initiatives. In both regions, one common reason is fear of superiors in the workplace to avoid conflicts and negative influence on individual employees. Through comparison and contrast, it is clear that employee silence in China is dependent on both organizational and cultural factors. In all, in the long run, employee silence leads to poor performance of the organization. The next chapter will elaborate on research method and research design.

3   CHAPTER 3: Methodology

3.1   Chapter Introduction

This chapter of the research focuses on the method used by the researcher to answer the research question: why and how do employees remain silent in Chinese organizations? The study follows a qualitative method utilizing thematic analysis of the research topic. This combination helps to enhance description of an interactive process and sort out significant indicators from a messy data, for the purpose of analyzing crucial themes. The chapter is divided into the following parts: research design, research methods, data collection and instrumentation, and analysis of the data.

3.2   Research Design

Most often, researchers have come to an agreement that validity and reliability of any research finding relies on the method of the research itself. In this case, the study method chosen must satisfy the researcher's ontological enthusiasm. A thematic research is an interpretive research, which creates social interaction between the researcher and the participant, thus building on the reality of the subject matter (Bengtsson, 2016). According to Peng, Kanthawala, Yuan, and Hussain (2016), this interview consists of only a limited number of participants, and therefore the qualitative method is more appropriate. This is the fundamental logic for choosing this method for his research. As a result, the interaction between the participants and the researcher creates more valid and reliable knowledge. Moreover, interactive studies help in cultivating in-depth meanings when the participants are closely linked to the research questions. Besides, interpretation of these experiences promotes validity and reliability of the information extracted from such conversations (Bengtsson, 2016).

Considering the research topic related to the understanding of employee silence in Chinese organizations, a valid and reliable direct source of information required to get information was people who were working in Chinese organizations. As a result, the researcher chose to conduct an interview by asking why and how questions with specific individuals working within Chinese.

3.3   Research Method

This research takes a qualitative thematic research approach. Thematic research methods are accused of subjectivity. Subjectivity is where the researcher's personal influence may impact on

the responses given out by the respondents (Solomon,2005). For instance, during a thematic interview, a researcher may pose questions that are negative to the organization in given occasions to find real experiences from the organization. The participant may feel agitated a lot due to personal frustrations within the organization, hence leading to biased knowledge. So, the researcher tries to avoid subjectivity by remaining neutral with the questions asked.

Also, such thematic studies are most often regarded as soft research. Soft research is accused of being unable to provide valid and reliable results to the researcher (Dreiling, Lougee & Nakamura, 2017), as the results obtained are said to be biased due to the subjectivity. Dreiling, Lougee and Nakamura (2017) suggest that despite a few criticisms of this method, thematic research method overcomes the various shortcomings evidenced in other research methods including quantitative methods. Certain limitations associated with some quantitative research methods such as elimination of given contexts from the respondents may avoid access to detailed information that would help in supporting a given research finding. So, the choice to use a thematic research method for this study upholds its own degree of credibility.

3.4 Data Collection

Six employees (3 male, 3 female) with 1-10 years of working experience, were selected to conduct semi-structured interviews about employee silence. Interviews occurred and were recorded via WeChat talk. The employees were named numerically as respondent 1, respondent 2, respondent 3, respondent 4, respondent 5, and respondent 6. The naming system was in line to the research design intended to hide their identities. Each participant was chosen to represent his or her organization of work. The request was made via WeChat platform to assist in answering research questions with agreement that their response will be used for the study only and their identity hidden. Organizations or companies where these participants were working were selected according to their size. Only those with over 500 employees and with a larger production scale were chosen. In such companies, a comprehensive employee hierarchy management system is available, which are suitable for the research of interactions between employees and the organizations. To sufficiently source data about the research question on why and how employees are silent in various organizations in China, the study deployed well-prepared interrogative questions to supplement the research questions. These questions that assisted in collection of data and in turn synthesis of the research findings. A total of eight questions listed below supplemented

the research questions. The same structured interview questions were required to ask to six respondents in the same manner. The average interview time for each participant was about half an hour. The research questions were developed in accordance with the Milliken et al (2003)'s postulations.

i. How often do you find yourself in a situation where you cannot openly raise an issue of concern to supervisors/peers/others?

ii. Can you describe for me what it feels like to discuss problems or difficult issues that concern/involve you at work with supervisors/peers/others?

iii. What made you feel that you could not or should not speak openly or honestly about a certain problems or issues?

iv. Can you describe the impact of supervisors' attitudes on your open expression of views or feelings?

v. Can you describe the impact of the organizational environment on your open expression of views or feelings?

vi. Do you think that your colleagues share this feeling of unease? Why or why not?

vii. Do you think your colleagues would give the same reasons as you for feeling uneasy about expressing their concerns at work?

viii. How do you think that being unable to express your opinions and feelings impacts you?

3.5 Data Analysis

Since validity of any thematic research lies with the level of data analysis, a sensitive data analysis was carried out step by step. The data collected were extremely diverse as every respondent could give his or her experiences (feelings, opinions, and attitudes) concerning the questions. Harmonised themes were to be deduced from the complex data collected (Gavin, 2008). Therefore, this study deployed thematic analysis for the structured interviews used. In thematic analysis, there was need to identify patterns of themes from the data obtained. Both explorative and deductive studies were used in the analysis, since thematic analysis allows such flexibility (Braun & Clarke,

2012). Explorative studies were used where the researcher had no clue about the issue from the participants while deductive studies was used where the researcher new exactly the outcome. Example of questions that required explorative studies in the research included question viii, which asked the participants about their thoughts and feelings on the impacts of their silence in the organization. Question one is an example of situations that required deductive analysis i.e. when the participants were asked on how often they find themselves quiet in the organization.

Thematic analysis followed the steps outlined below (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2011). (1) The first step was to get familiar with the data. Since the interview was conducted via recorded WeChat social media platform, there was need for transcription of the recorded audios or chats. Sorting and grouping of the results were done with the preliminary insights by going through the entire data. The most important thing here was that the transcription of the recorded audios retained their originality, the original record was conducted in Mandarin, and it had to be translated into English. (2) Secondly, there was generation of the initial codes. In this step, coding of the themes was done from the interview transcripts. This was done to every participant's response and every particular theme was coded into a table containing four columns, including "fear of job loss", "avoid conflicts". Here, interviewees were assigned with different numbers, too. (3) The third step of the analysis was theme searching. In the coded respondents' data, themes were further identified and sorted out. For instance, when respondents talked about their feelings (both negative and positive) of losing job related to the reason of keeping silent in the workplace, these negative emotion codes will be put together into one theme called "fear". (4) The fourth step was reviewing of the themes. In this step, the sorted themes were reviewed and relevant information such as quotes, and respondents' number added to the analysis table. A theme must have similarity from one respondent with another on a certain issue. (5) Defining and naming of all themes. For example, one of the final themes was initially showed as "avoid the serious consequence of conflicts with superior" and changed into "Chinese culture values of absolute loyalty and respect for the superior" after an overall look at the whole research. After reviewing, all themes were well defined accordingly with the context of the respondents and added to the table. (6) Report production. The sorted, defined, and coded five themes were tabled up for report purposes presented in the findings section, including fear (fear of job loss, fear of peer exclusion, fear of harmed reputation, and fear of malicious retaliation), Chinese culture values of absolute loyalty and respect for the superior,

futility, following directives, and working unhappily with dissatisfaction (lacking love and passion for the job, and resignation intentions).

3.6   Chapter Summary

The study utilized a qualitative thematic analysis to answer the research questions. Qualitative thematic analysis allowed for description of complex data to a refined theme presented in the findings. In the part of data collection, the research steps were explained in collecting data. Responses to the research questions were collected through eight questions, and these questions were designed based on correspondent literature reviewed. Lastly, the data analysis was explained as to how the various distinctive steps in thematic analysis were done, and as a result they were categorized into three major themes on the reasons and two big themes on ways of Chinese employee silence within Chinese organizations through whole analysis process. This theme consolidation step helped to sort out the complex data to further presentation and analysis. The next chapter will talk about the research findings.

4   CHAPTER 4: Findings

4.1   Chapter Introduction

The question of why and how employees are silent in Chinese organizations formed the research question for this study. According to the responses of the interviewed employees, it is clear that employees are very silent over many issues in the eight studied organizations in China. In response to research question one, the study tabled the following three big themes: (1) fear, including fear of job loss, fear of peer exclusion, fear of harmed reputation, and fear of malicious retaliation; (2) Chinese cultural values of absolute loyalty and respect for the superior, and (3) futility. In response to the second research question as regards to the ways of employee silence in the work organization, the study identified two main themes, including following directives and working unhappily with dissatisfaction, resulting in lacking love and passion for the job and resignation intentions.

4.2   Why Employees Remain Silent in Chinese Organizations

Table 1 displays a summary of themes with respect to the reasons why employees remain silent. The findings for each of these themes will be illustrated below.

Table 1 Summary of themes that lead to employee silence

Theme	Participants
Fear of Job Loss	3
Fear of Peer Exclusion	3
Fear of Harmed Reputation	3
Fear of Malicious Retaliation	3
Chinese Culture Values of Absolute Loyalty and Respect for The Superior	3
Futility	4

4.2.1 Fear

The interview revealed that the most common factor fuelling employees' silence in various organizations of work is fear in employees. The study identified fear as a theme when it was mentioned by three of the respondents during the interview. In this study, the theme of fear is defined as the unpleasant emotion caused by threats of job loss, harmed reputation, peer exclusion or danger of malicious retaliation. Each of the three respondents that showed the theme of fear demonstrated at least fear of one of these outcomes. This study identified employees' fear of four different outcomes prevented them from speaking their mind in an organization. It included fear of job loss, fear of peer exclusion at work place, fear of harmed reputation to oneself and fear of malicious retaliation. In most cases, as portrayed by all interviewees, above mentioned fear owing to conflicts with the opinions of employers would often keep them silent. In addition, some of the interviewees also claim that they decide to remain silent in their organizations because of the organizational tradition. New employees decide to get along with the fellow employees when they find out that   they are traditionally silent to avoid peer exclusion. Most of them claim that if they speak out, their leaders would see them as trouble makers and in turn, damage their reputation with the leader. Consequently, this may result in no promotion, demotion, oppression, or elimination from the organization by the leader.

4.2.1.1 **Fear of Job Loss**

This is the fear that if an employee speaks out, it might lead to job termination by the employer. Nowadays, the pressure of competition in the workplace is increasing, and since every employee would want to earn a living through the job, they avoid any activity that may lead to job termination. As portrayed by a majority of the participants in the interview, most of the employees choose to remain silent in complaints in their organizations of work due to the fear of job loss. For this reason, they fear that what they may speak out or constant contribution to the organization activities may appear naive to the employer, who may thereafter term them as trouble makers and decide to eliminate them from the organization leading to job loss. Since, none would want to lose his or her job, the employees decide to remain silent in the organization. This is observed in the response given by respondent 3 in the interview. In fact, respondent 3 said as below:

"So, I worry that if I express my feelings and opinions to my colleagues, they may send a small report to the leader, which may cause the leader to have a negative view that I like to complain or have dissatisfaction. Therefore, it is possible that I will be demoted or dismissed, instead of a promotion or salary increase." (Respondent 3).

For example, when the fourth question was asked, "how often do you find yourself in a situation where you cannot openly raise an issue of concern to supervisors/peers/others?" Consequently, they thought this may result into no promotion, demotion, oppression, or elimination from the organization by the leader (Respondents 2 and 3).

4.2.1.2 **Fear of Peer Exclusion**

Peer exclusion refers that fellow employees stop sharing with you some opinions or issues since they believe you might speak ill about them in the organization to avoid unnecessary trouble to them. Fear of peer exclusion is the fear of being excluded by fellow employees in an organization as a result of speaking out an issue against their will. This was identified by the responses given by three respondents. This can be seen in the response given by the respondent 1 in the interview. The respondent said:

"When I roughly understood the relationships and positions of my colleagues, I began to avoid discussing some of the work problems with them, because some would spread it on an ill purpose." (Respondent 1).

This is a reason of employee silence that develops out of fear that some employee may act like news centre, exchanging someone's private ideas with other employees without permission. Most employees think that even if they are only reflecting and suggesting problems to others on a small scale, rather than to their superiors, the wording is likely to be passed on to others and can't be kept a secret. The wider the message, the more likely it is that the entire workplace will see you as a complainer and someone who doesn't keep secrets, which will cause great trouble for you. So the best to do is to keep silent and not talk about it to anyone.

To avoid unnecessary trouble, the other employees will respond by excluding the one who is unable to keep secret. Alternatively, employees may sometimes be unhappy with a colleague out of the small talk he/she makes to the employers. This constitutes another factor for peer exclusion.

For instance, a participant is recorded telling an incidence where a friend of hers has a cordial relationship with their leader and takes that opportunity to come late and leave early from work. As the only one who knows the issue, she becomes reluctant from speaking it out. If the information leaks out, the friend would definitely know the one responsible for it and the leader would react indifferently. Apart from the damaged peer confidentiality, the interviewee would have no positive result in making the issue public, so silence was the best choice.

4.2.1.3 **Fear of Harmed Reputation**

This is the fear of damaging one's image to the leader. Three of the participants mentioned this in interviews. The fear of harmed reputation surrounds mainly the leader since they are the only authorities in the organization that can execute the power to hire and fire. This is clear in the response given by respondent 6 in the interview. The respondent cited that "I have to remain silent because of the competition in the department for individual promotion." The employee feared damage of image to the employer as a result of criticizing or adding a point to any of the organization's program. Respondent 3 said that speaking up in an organization may bring one from somebody to nobody.

> "So, I worry that if I express my feelings and opinions to my colleagues, they may send a small report to the leader, which may leave the leader a negative impression that I like to complain or have dissatisfaction, which future affects my promotion or salary increase." (Respondent 3).

From the point of view of a small group, one's leader may be one of the determinants of whether an employee can be promoted, but when an employee reports to his leaders' superiors about a plan to be implemented by the leader, it may result in the loss of the plan, which may negatively affect the performance of the entire department. If this happens, leaders are likely to have bad ideas about this person because of the damage to the performance of the department, thus affecting the images of this person.

4.2.1.4 **Fear of Malicious Retaliation**

Malicious retaliation refers to the bad outcome from the leader's or colleague's reaction after any communication by an employee. The employee is afraid of the actions that the employer or other

employees would take owing to the communication made. This retaliation, different from being fired or excluded, is more common in cases of negative comments with respect to the managerial or leadership traits of the employer. For instance, the retaliations can be seen in the cases of persistent petty and unjustified criticism from the manager, deliberate non-cooperation from certain employers, etc. This is seen in the responses given by the three respondents in the interview. For example, the respondent said:

> "I am afraid that the problems I reflect will endanger the interests of others, which may result in retaliation and affect my own work." (Respondent 3).

In this case, the retaliation can be from both the colleagues and the employer. Similarly, more comments were added as below:

> "I was afraid to have negative influence on the interests of others because of some casual words and was excluded or even retaliated by my colleagues, so I chose to be silent." (Respondent 4).

4.2.2   Chinese Cultural Values of Absolute Loyalty and Respect for the Superior

This refers to the cultural organization of a workplace. Loyalty of junior employees to the senior is coexistent with that of employees to the boss. From the responses given out by the participants, it is revealed that there are certain cultural values within the Chinese cultures that do not allow them to go against the norms in any organization. So, as a result, they follow the suit and withhold different opinions from the seniors and authorities within the organization. This theme was identified from responses of two participants. The respondent said:

> "Because neither my leadership nor corporate culture encourages employees to actively express our opinions and feelings, I feel that my colleagues will also feel uneasy or nervous if I speak up my ideas. This is a natural reaction." (Respondent 2).

In addition, employees usually find it difficult to address their bosses about their feelings, views, and opinions about the organization. "The boss is always right" finds way in such cases and no employee dares their bosses with a complaint at any point. This is initiated by the tradition of absolute loyalty and respect for the superior at any instance.

"Over time, everyone chose to be silent. I think people still have the psychology of conformity. If other people don't say it, then I won't be the first to say it." (Respondent 1).

4.2.3 Futility

Futility refers to the choice of the employees to remain silent because they believe that their contribution will not affect any change. Four participants discussed feelings of futility that prevented them from speaking out. For example, respondent 2 said:

"Even if I express my opinion, it will not affect anything…After I expressed my opinion and got no response, I choose to remain silent." (Respondent 2).

Another Respondent said, "Why bother saying anything." (Respondent 3).

The two responses out of the four participants who showed the feeling of futility, which is crucial for their decision making to be silent because the leader did not care about their ideas at all.

Similarly, Respondent 1 added, "The entire company does not encourage everyone to express their views and feelings. Even if someone proposes it, it will not be implemented."

4.3 What are the personal consequences for Chinese employees who choose to remain silent?

In line with the concept of employee silence, participants remained silent by not commenting or enquiring anything from their employers. This study also identified two main ways in which employees remain silent, a form of inefficiency at work. These included: (i) following directives and (ii) working unhappily with dissatisfaction. The second theme resulted in two sub themes: working without love and passion for the job, and resignation intentions. Following directives means that employees no longer attempt to respond to a problem, a suggestion or complaint, but choose to obey the leader directly .Working without love and passion for the job refers to the fact that some employees have gradually lost their enthusiasm for work in the long-term silence of employees because their problems and suggestions have not been responded to for a long time. When the situation is more serious, they will show the most resolute silence with the ultimate effort, that is, they do not want to work for the organization to reflect any problems for the organization and thus produce resignation intentions.

Indifferent employees feel that the organization is maltreating them, using them like cogs in the factory's machines. As a result, the employees develop the attitude of getting along with the system minus pursuing the organization's goal. The table below summarizes the ways on how employees remain silent in the organization.

Table 2 Summary of themes on ways of employee's silence

Theme	Number of Participants
Following Directives	6
Working Unhappily Under Dissatisfaction	3
Lacking Love and Passion for The Job	2
Resignation Intentions	4

4.3.1   Following Directives

This is where the employees simply follow the directives given by the employer, and they never question if the directives are right or wrong. Each participant mentioned this in their interview. For example, one respondent said:

> "I don't think I worked was as active as when I first started. Because I found that this job is not for everyone to brainstorm and express their opinions, but for the leadership to decide. What's more, even if the leader's instruction is wrong, I still have to work following his path." (Respondent 1).

In response to the third question "how do you think that being unable to express your opinions and feelings impacts you?", a majority of the participants confirmed remaining silent is the wise choice by following the leader's directives, no matter they are wrong or right. The participants said that when they aired out their views or challenges within the organization, their leader may not respond to it (futility), or react harshly, which damaged one's reputation with the organization. As a result, one is forced to remain silent by working with the experienced challenge without saying it out. This is further illustrated above by the feedback from respondent 1.

4.3.2   **Working Unhappily under Dissatisfactio**n

This is where the employees simply work to earn a living or bear with the unhappy working conditions due to the passion for the job. Working with fear of job loss, peer exclusion, harmed reputation and malicious retaliation makes the employees feel bitter of their work life. In fact, three interviewed employees felt bitter on how they are treated by their organizations, with the only option left is to obey the slogan of getting along and going along. This is depicted from three participants respectively respondents 2, 3 and 5.

"I feel very tangled and work very unhappy" (Respondent 2).

"I will be very depressed and very unhappy" (Respondent 3).

"This job can no longer bring me happiness" (Respondent 5).

This theme manifest itself through the following two sub-themes.

4.3.2.1   **Lacking Love and Passion for The Job**

This is when the employees have to work with the frustrations aiming at a particular objective. This theme was manifested in the response given by one participant. For instance, making some money to start off business and quit the work. While working under frustration may occur as a result of one loving the job. It is evidenced in the responses from respondents 1and 6, but if the situation persists, they might lose the original passion. For example, respondent 6 said "my love for this job is decreasing." Because their opinions, problems, suggestions and complaints have been ignored by the organization for a long time, and they do not have such an opportunity to vent them, employees gradually turn this disappointment into a decline in their love of work. And this becomes another way for them to choose the silence of employees, because there is not so much love, so there is not so much need to work effort for the organizations' better future.

4.3.2.2   **Resignation Intentions**

This is where the employees decide to resign from the work when they are not included in the organization. This is witnessed in the responses given by four respondents on one of the interview questions. The respondents 2 and 3 are quoted saying respectively. "This is the main reason why I consider resigning." "This also made me want to resign". Both shared the same view.

From the responses of respondents 2 and 3, we can see that when long-term repression has reached an irreversible stage, they will gradually have resignation intentions as the most determined employee's silent way of confronting the organization.

4.4   Chapter Summary

The findings tabled by the study are collected from the responses given by the six respondents interviewed. This chapter pointed out three reasons why Chinese employees remain silent in Chinese organizations and two main ways on how they remain silent in the organization. The three themes of reasons are (1) fear, including fear of job loss because of complaints, fear of peer exclusion because of the detriment of others, fear of harmed reputation in one's leaders' heart, fear of malicious retaliation from leaders and colleagues; (2) Chinese cultural values of absolute loyalty and respect for the superior; and lastly, (3) futility. This chapter also identified two themes regarding how employees keep silent in the organization, namely: following directives and working unhappily with dissatisfaction, which further resulted to lacking love and passion for the job and resignation intentions. The next chapter will discuss the findings of this study based on the existing literature.

5 CHAPTER 5: Discussion

5.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed discussion on the findings and literature review section. The chapter elaborates on the themes presented by this research. As earlier mentioned, the tabled themes included the following themes on why employees remain silent: (i) fear, including fear of job loss, fear of peer exclusion, fear of harmed reputation, and fear of malicious retaliation; (ii) Chinese cultural values of absolute loyalty and respect for the superior; and lastly, (iii) futility. Besides, the chapter identified two themes on ways how employees keep silent in the organization, namely, following directives and working unhappily with dissatisfaction, leading to lacking love and passion for the job and resignation intentions. More specifically, this part discusses these themes with theoretical insights from the literature review and the established theoretical frameworks such as Hofstede's power distance (Rhee, Dedahanov & Lee, 2014).

5.2 The Type of Employee Silence in Chinese Organization

As earlier mentioned in the literature review section, Pinder and Harlos (2001) pointed out the employee silence can be divided into two aspects: acquiescent silence and quiescent silence. This kind of silence is actually a kind of intentional negligence, rather than unintentional forgetting, because it depends on the employee's prediction of the degree of safety of their environment. If the employee thinks that their environment is safe enough, they might have a better chance of telling the truth. But if he feels that his environment is not safe, he is not willing to change this state.

According to research findings, the interviewees indicated that they all keep silence when they work in the Chinese organization due to the emotion of fear. For instance, they fear of losing jobs, being excluded by the peer colleague, reputation being harmed, and malicious retaliation from their superior or peer colleague. Moreover, they also have a feeling of futility. The emotion of fear dominates the employees to keep silent even they know the better way to solve problems or change situations for their organizations. The phenomenon demonstrates more about the quiescent employee silence when they work in a Chinese organization because almost all of the respondents are willing to speak up if the environment is suitable and safe enough. In other words, if there is

no misunderstanding of their loyalty to the superiors and their opinions are given to attention, they would choose not to be silent.

5.3 Why Chinese Employees Remain Silent in Chinese Organization

5.3.1 The Emotion of Fear

Based on the literature review, Dyne et al (2003) mentioned that personal gain or individual fear can lead to an employee silence. Of the six interviewed employees who works in a Chinese organization, three of them revealed being silent in their organizations as a result of fear of job loss, harmed reputation, peer exclusion, and malicious retaliation. According to the interview, the fear to communicate in an organization of work within the organizations of the six participant is contained within the context of the organization. Fear of speaking, what to speak and how to speak are fundamental aspects of the employee silence characteristics (Morrison, 2011). In this research study, all six participants who work in the Chinese organization, their employee silence are more related to fears. In particular they fear of losing job, losing a good relationship with people in the workplace, losing a chance to be promoted or losing sound reputation.

Huang et al., (2005) identified that employees in most western organizations may withhold information or change negative information as a way of reducing conflicts with their manager. In this research, the Chinese employees interviewed preferred to keep silent on negative information to avoid troubles. But according to Ma's (2010) research, some employees keeps silence because they lack self-initiative, but in this research, all interviews are more expressed their fears, not their working ability.

As mentioned in the previous part on the type of employee silence in Chinese organizations, the employees silence in Chinese organization belongs to the quiescent employee silence. The quiescent silence can be changed if one employee cannot accept the situation and choose to speak out, other employees will follow him or her to express their opinions, once they feel protected and safe (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). When a majority of employees express freely, the degree of individuals' fear may be decreased, since it is impossible for managers to punish them all. Therefore, the employee silence is changeable in this case, and the precondition is to create a safe and comfortable environment for employees in Chinese organizations.

5.3.2 Chinese Cultural Values of Absolute Loyalty and Respect for the Superior

Employee silence in Chinese organizations is associated with the traditional Chinese culture and values. Hofstede's power distance (1980) has been described as a form of social order in which inequality arises from the unequal distribution of power. According to Tyler and his colleagues' research (1997), they defined China belongs to a high-power distance society, whereas USA belongs to a lower power distance society. In a high-power distance culture, people are less likely to share power with those in a lower power level, and people at lower power level can seldom make or have voice in a decision process (Brockner et al., 2001; Hofstede,1980). The traditional Chinese culture, categorized with high power distance, has influence on the workplace. Furthermore, the culture of high-power distance in Chinese organizations will affect employees' feelings or reactions if they have less right of having voice in workplace, compared with the western style. However, in this research, if the environment is safe enough for them without misunderstanding of confronting the superiors, they would choose to speak up. In such a culture embracing values of absolute loyalty and respect to the superior, the lower-level employees tend to choose to finish every task as required by their superiors, even they know the task is wrong or unfavourable for the organizational productivity. From the interviews with the respondent employees, most admit the fact of Chinese cultural values of absolute loyalty and respect for the superior in organizational management. Therefore, they choose to keep silent and simply follow the leader's directives whether wrong or right. The findings tabled is a crystal confirmation of the Geert Hofstede's power distancing framework, which outlines cultural power dimension in organizations to be flowing in a hierarchical order of authority (Zhang, 2010).

In addition, the employees tend to keep the traditional norms of the organization in traditional Chinese culture. For this study, there is another reason for employee silence. To be accurate, once a new employee is recruited, he or she simply get along with the rest and conform with the majority. These observations from the participants' responses are also supported by the theoretical perspectives of other scholars and researchers. Any work environment harmonises people together with certain order of hierarchy from down to top positions (Morrison, 2011; Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Rhee, Dedahanov & Lee, 2014). Apart from the above points, employees may benefit from absolute loyalty and respect for the bosses, such as promotions, salary increase, leave with pay,

vacations, and assignment of favourable duties. So, when an employee considers these factors, the notion of "to get along, go along" sets in place (Rhee, Dedahanov & Lee, 2014).

5.3.3   Futility

The study identified one cause of employee silence as they consider speaking up is a futile action. In the interviews, four employees expressed their action as a consequent of futility and showed a feeling of being neglected. For this reason, the group of employees felt that their views wouldn't be considered by their leader.

In the western cultures, employees are mostly unwilling to share information that may be perceived as intimidating or off-putting to those in higher ranks in a managerial hierarchy. However, for the Eastern Asian employees' silence is distinct because they do not always express their personal opinions and are often blamed for being unwilling to express their concerns in group meetings, both informally and formally (Whiteside & Barclay, 2013).

Finally, the theme of futility is an inevitable part of the other three themes discussed towards the causes of employees' silence in the Chinese organization. Fear and the absolute loyalty and respect to the superiors are more closely related with personal aspects, but futility is more related with the overall development of the organizations and then it may create opportunities for individuals.

Therefore, such employees who are silent in an organization due to various reasons may end up being indifference with each other (Zhao, 2012). Following various studies, indifferent employees are usually fond of failure due to lack of job commitment, creativity, innovation and ambition towards the organizational goal (Rhee, Dedahanov, & Lee, 2014; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Hence, it is imperative that the Chinese managers establish policies that enhance openness, which will enable the organization to conduct appropriate diagnosis to the appropriate destinations.

5.4 What are the personal consequences for Chinese employees who choose to remain silent?

5.4.1 Continuing to following directives

The study identified that employees may go silent over organizational issues or matters by simply continuing to follow the directives given by the employer or the leader in charge. Based on the causes of the silence in the organization, the six participants pointed out that they would prefer

remaining silent when their views are not considered by their employers or leaders. As a result, they follow the directives made by the leaders, whether wrong or right. This tendency for employees to remain silent and follow their leader's directives is supported by some of the literature of which argues that unlistened to employees adopt the 'get along' slogan that makes them simply follow the leader's directives (Van Dyne, Ang, Botero I C, 2003; Whiteside & Barclay, 2013; Rhee, Dedahanov, & Lee, 2014; Pinder, & Harlos, 2001). As employees are loyal to the employer, they will firmly support and implement the employer's instructions regardless of whether they are right or wrong. Although their personal judgment is different from that of the leaders, they still choose to remain silent and believe in the leader. In this case, loyalty is negative.

5.4.2 Working Unhappily with Dissatisfaction

The participants portrayed the act of working unhappily with dissatisfaction as a solution to the unaddressed views in their contribution to the organizational management. From the interview, two conditions arose when the employees decide to work unhappily with dissatisfaction, including lacking love and passion to the job and having resignation intentions. In any organization, employees could feel frustrated if they are ignored, and they work simply to earn a living. This, consequently, makes them develop feelings of job resignation and negative attitudes towards the organization. In other words, the long-term silence of employee success causes employees to love the organization less and less, which in turn leads to more employee silence, thus forming a vicious circle.

5.5 Chapter Summary

In conclusion, in answering to the research question, the study identified three reasons why employees are silent, and two main ways in which employees are silent. The three reasons why employees are silent in most of the Chinese organization included fear, Chinese values of absolute loyalty and respect to the superior, and futility. The study as well identified two personal consequences for employees who choose to remain silent. These two main consequences include following the employer's directive whether wrong or right and working unhappily with dissatisfaction which comprises of the feelings of resigning from the job, and lacking love to the job. As described, these findings are in line with the postulations made in the literature materials reviewed. More specifically, Hofstede's power distance (Rhee, Dedahanov & Lee, 2014) is

employed as analytical tools in the discussions. The final chapter will be conclusion for the whole research. It will restate the aims of the research and the key themes identified, the key findings from discussion, as well as limitations and future research.

6   CHAPTER 6: Conclusion

The aim of this research study was to better understand employee silence in Chinese organizations. This study identified three key reasons for why employees in Chinese organization stay silent: (1) fear, including fear of job loss, fear of peer exclusion, fear of harmed reputation, and fear of malicious retaliation; (2) Chinese cultural values of absolute loyalty and respect for the superior; and lastly, (3) futility. In addition, two themes on ways how employees keep silent in the organizations were identified, namely, following directives and working unhappily with dissatisfaction leading to lacking love and passion for the job and resignation intentions.

From the academic point of view, the most important contribution of this research is the analysis of employee silence in China through semi-structured interviews with Chinese employees. Because the literature in the Chinese context is relatively small. According to the information collected, studies seldom investigate employee silence in Chinese enterprises, despite being a common occurrence in China.

In Chapter Two, literature in the field of employee silence is reviewed. Comparison and contrast of employee silence between the western (the US) and the eastern (China) organizations is conducted to figure out the specific cultural factors in Chinese organizations. Generally, a company's culture may influence the communication behaviours of an employee. In the western cultures' employees are mostly unwilling to share information that may be perceived as intimidating or off-putting to those in higher ranks in a managerial hierarchy. However, for the Asian employees' silence is distinct because they do not always express their personal opinions and are often blamed for being unwilling to express their concerns in group meetings, both informally and formally. Their pace of turn-taking and conversation is extremely culture-dependent. Because asking those in the top leadership may lead to conflict, employees often chose to conceal their concerns and ideas, thereby resulting in occasional organizational output and reduced morale among employees who do not get the chance to key in their interests (Yan, 2012).

This research study utilized a qualitative thematic analysis to answer the research questions. Qualitative thematic analysis allowed for description of complex data to a refined theme presented in the findings. The methodology process is divided into four sections: research design, research method, data collection process and analysis method of the data collection. Firstly, it is imperative

to source the primary data from Chinese employees in large Chinese organizations with hierarchy structure. Then, the logic for selection of qualitative thematic analysis is explored. As of research methods, there are strengths and weaknesses for the study through interviews of six Chinese employees via WeChat. Though being accused of lacking validity and reliability, thematic qualitative analysis still fits into this research. Possible subjective bias is avoided as much as possible by intentional design of interview questions; and meanwhile, this method leaves the room for in-depth interpretive research. In data collection part, the following issues are explained, like the steps followed in collecting data, the eight research questions designed, and the literatures reviewed. Lastly, the various distinctive steps in thematic analysis of the data collected are introduced, from familiarization of data collected to report written. In the data analysis part, after sorting out and consolidation, five particular themes were identified from the complex data presented for further analysis.

The primary findings are categorized into the reasons of employee silence, including fear (losing the job, peer exclusion, harmed reputation, and malicious retaliation), Chinese cultural values of absolute loyalty and respect for the superior and futility; as well as the ways of employee silence, namely, following directives and working unhappily with dissatisfaction leading to lacking love and passion for the job and resignation intentions. These are explored in details based on transcripts from the interviewees' responses. These findings are in line with the postulations made in the literature materials reviewed. According to Zhao (2012), Yao, Deng and Zheng (2009), and Zhang (2010), silence in employees causes indifference in them. As a consequence, indifferent employee expresses fear, which resonates around losing the job, social exclusion, harmed reputation, and malicious retaliation when they speak. Futility for employees concerning their participation in their organizations of work is also evidenced in this study. According to the Whiteside and Barclay (2013), Rhee, Dedahanov and Lee (2014), and Pinder and Harlos (2001), inadequate attention of employees' contribution by the employer demoralizes the employee from speaking again. The findings tabled is also a vivid evidence of the Geert Hofstede's power distancing, which outlines cultural power dimension in organizations to be flowing in a hierarchical order of authority. Moreover, the findings are in line with the "Exit-Voice-Loyalty-Neglect" framework, which holds that the value the organization puts on the employees is directly proportional to the benefits it gathers.

The consequences of employee silence are illustrated throughout the study. On one hand, employee silence in Chinese organizations resulted in disengagement, dissatisfaction, cynicism and stress amongst employees. On the other hand, employees in Chinese organizations have a tendency of remaining silent when they have negative information, while constructive news is possibly to flow up managerial hierarchies much more voluntarily. This may lead to a variety of information imbalance between employees and superiors with higher positions. Also, it may result in grave misrepresentations upon which organizational leaders make their decisions. Therefore, Chinese employee silence about critical issues has significantly compromised the ability of many organizations to identify mistakes and engage in learning.

Currently, a good number of Chinese organizations have attempted to establish a work environment where employees can freely and safely speak their ideas. As is shown in the study, Chinese employee silence is mostly quiescent silence, indicating that a number of employees in Chinese organizations have resolved to choose silence and withholding their ideas, dependent on environments. This provides a chance for potential solutions.

Therefore, to eliminate employee silence when they obtain information about possible vital errors for an organization, managers in Chinese organizations should design learning systems that ensures that the employees realize the benefits of speaking up about their concerns that may put the organization at risk. More importantly, organizational managers should convince their employees that they are genuinely interested in listening to their concerns or challenges they encounter within the organization (Brockner et al., 2001). This further demands establish the environment of openness. It is imperative that the managers establish related policies. This will enable the organization to conduct appropriate diagnosis to the appropriate destinations.

As for the limitations, owing to limited preparation for this study, the interview question is far from exhaustive and half-an-hour interview for each interviewee was short, inadequate for them to offer in-depth responses. The scale of interviewees was small, undermining the representativeness of the findings. To make it worse, thanks to the COVID-19, chat via WeChat was selected instead of face-to-face talk, which left room for their possible covering of true feelings, further curtailing objectivity of the research. For future research, quantitative research could be conducted to respectively examine the relationships of the reasons and ways regarding employee silence. For instance, although this research identified a few themes for the reasons, the

mediate or moderate relation within those factors might be investigated so that researchers can figure out how one aspect of the themes might influence the another.

Future research on employee silence can further explore the impact of cultural values of Chinese employees. Second, we can further study the effect of employee silence to explore its specific impact on organizational effectiveness. Thirdly, we can introduce silence of leaders to contrast with the silence of ordinary employees to further delineate different mechanisms of organization silence.

References

Anderson, C., John, O. P., & Keltner, D. (2012). The personal sense of power. *Journal of Personality*, *80*(2), 313-344.

Ashford, S. J., Rothbard, N. P., Piderit, S. K., & Dutton, J. E. (1998). Out on a limb: The role of context and impression management in selling gender-equity issues. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 43, 23-57.

Bengtsson, M. (2016). How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis. *NursingPlus Open,* 2, 8-14.

Brockner, J., Ackerman, G., Greenberg, J., Gelfand, M., Francesco, A., & Chen, Z. (2001). Culture and Procedural Justice: The Influence of Power Distance on Reactions to Voice. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *37*(4), 300-315. doi: 10.1006/jesp.2000.1451

Brinsfield, C. T. (2013). Employee silence motives: Investigation of dimensionality and development of measures. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, *34*(5), 671-697.

Bond, M. H., & Hwang, K. K. (1987). The social psychology of Chinese people. In: Bond M H (ed.), The Psychology of Chinese People. NY: Oxford University Press, 213–266.

Cheng, H. A., & Zheng, J. H. (2008). Cultural Roots of Employee Silence in China. *Proceedings of the Annual Conference on Management in China,* 3, 3119-3130.

Conlee, M. C., & Tesser, A. (1973). The effects of recipient desire to hear on news transmission. *Sociometry*, 4, 588-599.

Cullinane, N., & Donaghey, J. (2020). Chapter 27: Employee silence. In *Handbook of research on employee voice*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Donaghey, J., Cullinane, N., Dundon, T., & Wilkinson, A. (2011). Reconceptualising employee silence: Problems and prognosis. *Work, employment and society*, *25*(1), 51-67.

Dreiling, M.C., Lougee, N. & Nakamura, T. (2017). After the meltdown: Explaining the silence of Japanese environmental organizations on the Fukushima nuclear crisis. *Social Problems, 64*(1), 86-105.

Dutton, J. E., Ashford, S. J., O'Neill, R. M., & Lawrence, K. L. (2001). Moves that matter: Issue selling and organizational change. *Academy of Management Journal,* 4, 716-736.

Dyne, L. V., Ang, S., & Botero, I. C. (2003). Conceptualizing employee silence and employee voice as multidimensional constructs. *Journal of Management Studies*, *40*(6), 1359-1392.

Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations,* 40, 427-448.

Fuller, S. (2003). 'Karl Popper and the Reconstitution of the Rationalist Left'. *Science Studies, 16*(1), 22-37.

Glauser, M. J. (1984). Upward information flow in organizations: Review and conceptual analysis. *Human Relations,* 37, 613-643.

Greenberg, J., & Edwards, M. S. (Eds.). (2009). *Voice and silence in organizations*. Emerald Group Publishing.

Huang, X., Van de Vliert, E., & Van der Vegt, G. (2005). Breaking the silence culture: Stimulation of participation and employee opinion withholding cross-nationally. *Management and Organization Review*, *1*(3), 459-482.

Huang, X., Vliert, E. V., & Vegt, G. V. (2003). Break the silence: do management openness and employee involvement raise employee voice worldwide. *Academy of Management Proceedings,* 2, 126.

Hofstede, G. (1980). Culture's consequences. London: Sage

Janowski, A. (2015). The talents as the most valuable intangible assets of the company. *Journal of US-China Public Administration*, *12*(4). doi:10.17265/1548-6591/2015.04.004

Knoll, M., & Van Dick, R. (2013). Do I hear the whistle…? A first attempt to measure four forms of employee silence and their correlates. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *113*(2), 349-362.

Kramer, C. (2009). Communication linking team mental models and team situation awareness in the operating room. doi:10.22215/etd/2009-08651

Le, P. D., Teo, H. X., Pang, A., L. I. Y., & Goh, C. Q. (2019). When silence is golden: The use of strategic silence in crisis management. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal, 24*(1), p.162.

Li, R. (2012). "Traditional values, the subordinate relationship with the employees' silence - at a local cultural context Empirical Exploration". *Management World,* Vol. 3.

Liang, J. (2008). Promotive and prohibitive voice behavior in organizations: A two-wave longitudinal examination. Paper presented at the Third Conference of the International Association for Chinese Management Research, Guangzhou, China.

Liu, H. Yang,M.N. Xu,X.Y.&Liu, X.R.(2017). Employee Silence, Psychological Safety and Turnover Intention. *Academic of Shenyang University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, 34,*83-90.

Luchak, A. A. (2003). What kind of voice do loyal employees use? *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, *41*(1), 115-134. doi:10.1111/1467-8543.00264

Ma, H. (2010). The Analysis of Employee Silence Based on Behaviour Shift. *Journal of Applied Psychology,* (5), 320-323.

Meyerson, D. (2001). *Tempered radicals: How people use difference to inspire change at work*. Boston, Ma.: Harvard Business School Press

Milliken, F. J., Morrison, E. W., & Hewlin, P. F. (2003). An exploratory study of employee silence; issues that employees don't communicate upward and why. *Journal of Management Studies, 40*(6), 1453-1476. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00387

Morrison, E., & Milliken, F. J. (2000). Organizational silence: a barrier to change and development in a pluralistic world. *Academy of Management Review*, 25, 706-725.

Nunnally, J. C. (1978). Psychometric theory (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Oppel, R. A. (2002). *Enron official says many knew about shaky company finances.* New York Times.

Paksirat, V., & Taheri, A. (2018). Organizational Silence and Occupational Burnout with Job Performance. *Journal of System Management, 4*(4), 39-50.

Parker, C. P., Baltes, B. B., Young, S. A., Huff, J. W., Altmann, R. A., Lacost, H. A., & Roberts, J. E. (2003). "Relationships between psychological climate perceptions and work outcomes: a meta-analytic review". *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 24*(4), 389-416.

Peng, W., Kanthawala, S., Yuan, S. and Hussain, S.A. (2016). A qualitative study of user perceptions of mobile health apps. *BMC public health, 16*(1), 1-11.

Pinder, C. C., & Harlos, K. P. (2001). Employee silence: Quiescence and acquiescence as responses to perceived injustice. *Research in personnel and human resources management*, *20*, 331-370.

Rhee, J., Dedahanov, A., & Lee, D. (2014). Relationships among power distance, collectivism, punishment, and acquiescent, defensive, or prosocial silence. *Social Behaviour and Personality: an international journal*, *42*(5), 705-720.

Roberts, K. H., & O'Reilly, C. A. (1974). Failures in upward communication in organizations: Three possible culprits. *Academy of Management Journal,* 17, 205-215.

Rosen, S., & Tesser, A. (1970). On reluctance to communicate undesirable information: The MUM effect. *Sociometry,* 33, 253-263.

Rusbult, C. E., & Farrell, D. (1983). A longitudinal test of the investment model: The impact on job satisfaction, job commitment, and turnover of variations in rewards, costs, alternatives, and investments. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *68*(3), 429-438. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.68.3.429

Ryan, K. D., & Oestreich, D. K. (1991). *Driving fear out of the workplace: How to overcome the invisible barriers to quality, productivity, and innovation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Sprague, J., & Rudd, G. L. (1988). Boat-rocking in the high-technology culture. American *Behavioural Scientist,* 32, 169-193.

Tamuz, M. 2001. Learning disabilities for regulators: The perils of organizational learning in the air transportation industry. *Administration & Society,* 3, 276-302.

Tyler, T. R., Lind, E. A., & Huo, Y. J. (in press). Cultural values and authority relations: The psychology of conflict resolution across cultures. Psychology, Public Policy, and Law.

Van Dyne, L., Ang, S., & Botero, I. C. (2003). Conceptualizing employee silence and employee voice as multidimensional constructs. *Journal of Management Studies, 40*, 1359–1392.

Wang Junbo, "Psychological expectations and behavior under Uncertain Circumstances selection", Beijing: Intellectual Property Press, 2012, 36-46.

Whiteside, D. B., & Barclay, L. J. (2013). Echoes of silence: Employee silence as a mediator between overall justice and employee outcomes. *Journal of business ethics*, *116*(2), 251-266.

Withey, M. J., & Cooper, W. H. (1989). Predicting exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 34, 21-539.

Xie, Z. S., & Yang, Z, R. (2006). 创新共同体：企业全员创新模式的 新探索 (Innovative community: A new exploration in organizational innovation). *科学研究*,5 (10), 775–779

Xu, H.H, Zhang,P. & Sun, Y.D.(2019). A Review of the Relationship between Employee Silence and Leader Silence. *Chinese and foreign management,* (4), 66-69.

Yan, X. H. (2012). The Influence and Mechanisms of Leader-Member Exchange to Voice Behaviour. *Zhejiang industry and commerce university.*

Yao, S. J., Deng, Y. N., & Zheng, J. H. (2009). The Cultural Roots of Employee Silence under the Background of China. *East China Economic Management*, (6), 135-138.

Zhang, M. (2010). A little thinking about employee silence behaviour classification. *Management Space, 9,* 32-33.

Zhao, C. L. (2012). *Study on Status of Organizational Silence and Countermeasures under the Chinese Background*. Chong Qing University.

Zheng Xiaotao, "Employees silence measurement and relationship with confidence under Chinese background", Psychology, Vol. 2, 2008.

Appendix

28 April 2020

Nimbus Staniland
Faculty of Business Economics and Law

Dear Nimbus

Re Ethics Application: **20/93 Understanding employee silence in organizations**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 24 April 2023.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEC in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organizations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organization at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: holryren0121@gmail.com; Tagonei Mharapara