

# Employee Silence: Literature Review, Concept Clarification, Chinese Cultural Implications and Future Directions

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Employee silence, the withholding of input about work-related matters, has been frequently observed in organizations, and it may be detrimental to organizational performance and employees' well-being. Hence, employee silence has become an important topic in recent years and accumulated massive research to examine its antecedents and consequences. However, some issues still need to be addressed, including unclear definition of the construct and lack of a systematic integration of the results. Therefore, this paper will re-clarify the concept of employee silence, integrate the results of past research, and provide suggestions for future research. We first clarify the development of the employee silence construct, the relationship between silence motives and silence behavior, the similarities and differences between silence and voice, and the important characteristics of employee silence. Secondly, we sort out the current research on employee silence and put forward the culture issue, explaining the particularity of employee silence in Chinese culture in order to provide further inspiration for future research on employee silence in Taiwan. Finally, we also propose recommendations for future research.

**Keywords:** *Chinese culture, Chinese employee silence, employee silence*

## Extended Abstract

Employee silence has become an important research topic in recent years due to its pervasiveness in organizations and its detrimental effects on organizational performance and employee attitudes and well-being. Early studies treated silence as equivalent to the absence of voice (e.g., Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Madrid et al., 2015). However, an increasing number of researchers now consider silence as an independent construct because of the distinction between silence and voice in definitions, research emphasis, measurement approaches, and behavioral phenomena. As research on employee silence has gradually diverged from that on voice, it has developed into a distinct research context.

However, with the accumulation of relevant research on employee silence, two major issues have emerged: unclear conceptual definitions and a lack of integration of research findings. With regards to conceptual definitions, a common research approach is to classify employee silence by the motives behind it (e.g., Knoll & van Dick

2013b; van Dyne et al., 2003). However, this creates confusion over whether the concept of silence refers to the behavior itself or the motive underlying the behavior, which further threatens the construct validity (e.g., Li & Xing, 2021; Rai & Agarwal, 2018). Another issue with conceptual definitions is the relationship between silence and voice. Some researchers simultaneously draw on different perspectives in a single study, which muddies the waters between silence and voice. As for the issue of lack of integration, previous research has identified numerous antecedents, consequences, and moderators of employee silence while failing to systematically integrate the findings, making it challenging for researchers to obtain a comprehensive understanding of employee silence. Building on these two issues, this article aims to clarify the definition of employee silence by conducting a thorough review of the literature on employee silence and providing suggestions for future research. In so doing, this article contributes to advancing our understanding of

employee silence.

This article also considers the role that Chinese culture plays in employee silence. Many studies have acknowledged the influence of culture, especially Chinese culture, on employee silence (e.g., Bruneau, 1973; Knoll et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2012), and the findings of many studies published in international journals have been derived from Chinese samples. However, most of these studies adopted an etic approach and did not focus specifically on the influence of Chinese culture on employee silence (e.g., Wang & Hsieh, 2013; Xu et al., 2015). Given the significance and uniqueness of employee silence in the Chinese context, this article also explores employee silence from a Chinese indigenous perspective and provides some suggestions for future indigenous research.

## The Concept of Employee Silence

### Employee Silence Behavior and Motives

When Pinder and Harlos (2001) introduced the concept of employee silence, they categorized it into two forms, acquiescent silence and quiescent silence, along with their behavioral, affective, and cognitive components. Building on Pinder and Harlos's classification and considering the motives underlying silence, van Dyne et al. (2003) differentiated three types of silence behavior: acquiescent silence based on resignation, defensive silence driven by fear, and prosocial silence driven by cooperation. Many subsequent researchers have followed the approach of van Dyne et al. (2003) in differentiating employee silence by the motives behind it (e.g., Knoll et al., 2019; Lam & Xu, 2019). However, a common problem in such studies is that the construct of employee silence encompasses two distinct components: motive and behavior. The motive provides the impetus for intentional silence behavior (Brinsfield, 2013), which is different from the actual behavior exhibited. This poor conceptualization can result in contaminated measures and weak theoretical justification for hypotheses (e.g., Knoll et al., 2019; Zhang & Cao, 2021). Therefore, it is advisable to differentiate between the conceptualization of silence motives and silence

behavior. This article adopts this perspective and views silence motives as the proximal antecedents of silence behavior.

### Employee Silence and Voice

In the historical development of the concept of employee silence, the relationship between silence and voice has been a topic of considerable interest. Researchers have generally approached this issue from two perspectives. One perspective views silence and voice as two endpoints on a continuous spectrum (e.g., Morrison, 2011), with low voice behavior indicating silence. The other perspective treats silence and voice as independent constructs (e.g., Sherf et al., 2021). However, controversy remains over whether the findings from research on voice can be directly applied to understanding the phenomenon of employee silence. This controversy stems from several primary arguments, including differences in focus (Morrison et al., 2015), partially overlapping definitions (Knoll et al., 2016; van Dyne et al., 2003), behaviors that are not mutually exclusive (Knoll et al., 2016; Sherf et al., 2021), and measurements that are not entirely symmetrical (Morrison et al., 2015). Furthermore, many studies have provided quantitative evidence supporting the notion that silence and voice are distinct constructs, including the results of correlation analyses, confirmatory factor analyses, model testing, and meta-analyses (e.g., Detert & Edmonson, 2011; Knoll & Redman, 2016; Madrid et al., 2015; Serf et al., 2021). In sum, as both silence and voice represent forms of communication in organizations, certain discussions related to voice are also relevant to silence. However, many researchers also argue that silence and voice differ in various ways. Therefore, when using findings related to voice to explain the phenomenon of silence, careful consideration of their similarities and differences is essential.

### The Important Characteristics of Employee Silence

According to the literature, understanding employee silence requires an examination of two crucial

characteristics known as “targets” and “contents” (Brinsfield et al., 2009). Employees may choose to remain silent about various targets or topics in the workplace, and this choice involves distinct psychological processes and action strategies (Brinsfield et al., 2009; Kish-Gephart et al., 2009). The targets of silence can include supervisors, colleagues, subordinates, and others (Brinsfield, 2013). When employees face their supervisors, they are likely to be influenced by power dynamics, leading them to choose silence because of their fear of punishment or adverse career consequences (Sherf et al., 2021; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). In terms of the contents of silence, or the issues that employees choose to remain silent about, these might include concerns about the abilities or performance of colleagues or supervisors, suggestions for improving organizational processes or performance, personal career issues or concerns, and ethical or fairness issues (Brinsfield, 2013). Addressing work-related issues can be perceived as an accusation against the supervisor and thus carries a certain amount of risk (Detert & Edmondson, 2011), whereas concealing the unethical or illegal behavior of others can evoke negative emotions such as guilt (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). In conclusion, when conducting research on employee silence, it is essential for researchers to clearly define the specific conceptual scope of employee silence that they intend to study. By so doing, researchers can more accurately capture the silent phenomena they aim to investigate.

### The Definition of Employee Silence

Based on the literature, this article defines employee silence as deliberately refraining from expressing information, opinions, suggestions, or concerns related to work or the organization that might contribute to improving the current situation. The characteristics associated with this definition are as follows.

First, employee silence is a form of inhibitory communication behavior in workplace interpersonal interactions (Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). It assumes that there is something to be said that remains unspoken. In other words, employee silence does not encompass situations where

the employee has no thoughts about a matter, lacks the opportunity to speak, or maintains silence unconsciously. Second, employee silence is a covert behavior, meaning that it is not directly observable (van Dyne et al., 2003). Even when an employee displays various communication behaviors at work, he or she may remain silent on certain work issues, and this may go unnoticed by others. Third, employee silence is directed toward a specific target in the workplace (Chou & Cheng, 2020; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008), meaning that employee silence does not involve situations where there is no target to speak to (or be silent with). Additionally, while van Dyne et al. (2003) restricted the context of employee silence to face-to-face interactions, this article argues that communication through different media also qualifies as employee silence if employees withhold their work-related thoughts when they have the opportunity to express them (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Fourth, the content of employee silence covers a broad scope (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009), but it must be work related. Therefore, withholding information unrelated to work, such as details about others’ personal lives, is not considered employee silence. Fifth, employee silence is an intentional behavior driven by various motives (Brinsfield, 2013). These motives are influenced by contextual factors, triggered by different psychological mechanisms, and may coexist simultaneously, ultimately leading employees to choose to remain silent.

## Current Research Findings on Employee Silence

Figure 1 presents the current research findings on employee silence published in international English and Taiwanese journals in the field of organizational management and psychology. The antecedents of silence have generated the richest research results. The majority of studies have focused on why people remain silent, and have followed two approaches. The first approach predicts employee silence behavior based on individual characteristics, leader behaviors, and organizational contexts (considered as distal antecedents) (e.g., Morrison et al., 2015; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008; Wang & Hsieh, 2013). The second approach aims to capture

the motives behind silence behavior (considered as proximal antecedents) (e.g., Brinsfield, 2013; Knoll & van Dick, 2013b). In terms of the consequences of silence behavior, recent research has primarily focused on the psychological and behavioral aspects of individuals who choose to remain silent, with only a limited number of studies exploring interpersonal dimensions. A few studies have explored situational factors (moderators) related to employee silence.

### **Employee Silence in Chinese Culture**

Numerous studies on employee silence conducted in the Chinese context using Chinese samples have been published in international journals (e.g., Chou & Chang, 2021; Ju et al., 2019). However, these studies have generally adopted an etic research approach by replicating, validating, and extending Western theoretical viewpoints and research findings within Chinese organizations, without adequately considering Chinese culture (e.g., Chou & Chang, 2021; Ju et al., 2019; Wang & Hsieh, 2013). An emic research approach is likely to provide a more accurate and in-depth understanding of the unique silence phenomenon in Chinese organizations (Tsui, 2006).

### **Exploring Employee Silence from the Perspective of Chinese Cultural Values**

Harmony, Zhongyong, guanxi, and an “other” orientation are values that can prompt employees to exhibit silence behavior, each of which gives employee silence a distinct meaning. First, Chinese individuals prioritize the establishment of harmonious and balanced dynamic relationships with others and the surrounding environment. In this regard, silence can be seen a strategy to maintain interpersonal harmony and avoid interpersonal discord and divisions within the team (Huang, 1999). Second, according to Zhongyong, Chinese employee silence may be a self-regulating behavior, representing “bearing, giving in, waiting, avoiding, and retreating.” By remaining silent, employees can avoid extremes and reach a “middle way.” Third, Chinese interpersonal interaction and communication are guided by the concept of guanxi,

which emphasizes the relationship between two parties as the foundation for action. From this perspective, silence can be viewed as a behavior aligned with Chinese role norms, a means of saving the other party’s face, or respecting authority. Fourth, silence could serve as a manifestation of convergence and the avoidance of differences, fostering positive social interactions and enhancing one’s self-worth.

### **Research Approaches Used to Study Chinese Employee Silence**

Current studies on Chinese employee silence can be categorized into four main research approaches, based on the study’s cultural perspective (etic or emic) and contextualization approach. The first approach uses samples from the Chinese population and directly applies Western theoretical viewpoints without discussing the specific impact of Chinese cultural contexts. The second approach views the concept of employee silence as having cross-cultural universality but acknowledges that culture can influence the interpretation of the relationships between concepts. Therefore, this type of research attempts to consider the specific characteristics of Chinese culture when explaining the relationships between variables. The third approach also views employee silence as having cross-cultural universality. However, it acknowledges the influence of other Chinese indigenous concepts. Therefore, this type of research incorporates additional Chinese cultural indigenous variables into the research framework to examine their effects on employee silence. The fourth approach posits that Chinese culture directly influences the definition, essence, and manifestation of employee silence. As such, it adopts an insider research approach to advance new perspectives, construct Chinese insider concepts related to employee silence, and develop measurement tools for examining phenomena related to Chinese employee silence. Currently, there are very few studies falling into this category, with the majority presented as conference papers or master’s and doctoral theses. In sum, the first research approach does not consider cultural influences; the second approach only partially incorporates indigenous Chinese concepts; and only the

third and fourth approaches typically carry higher levels of indigenous Chinese implications.

### **Current Research Findings on Chinese Employee Silence**

Figure 2 presents the current research findings on Chinese employee silence. In summary, similar to the Western context, there is a primary emphasis on exploring antecedent effects (individual characteristics, leader behavior, and work contexts) and silence motives, while the examination of consequences and moderating factors remains relatively limited. However, what distinguishes Chinese studies from Western studies is the exploration of the impact of silent event characteristics, such as the content of silence and the relationship between the silent employee and the target. Additionally, there is currently limited exploration of the consequences of silence behavior, with a primary focus on the impact on job performance, especially creativity. There is a lack of research on individual work attitudes, psychological well-being, and interpersonal consequences.

### **Conclusion**

Since Morrison and Milliken (2000) proposed the concept of organizational silence, employee silence has attracted increasing attention from researchers and generated numerous empirical research findings. To further advance research on employee silence, we propose several future research directions. First, future research could continue to refine the conceptualization of employee silence, particularly by clarifying the relationship between silence behavior and silence motives. Second,

future research could develop valid measurement scales based on a sound conceptualization of employee silence. To avoid the issue of common method variance, future research could examine the validity of methods that rely on reports from other sources or explore alternative research approaches, such as behavioral observation, experimental methods, and diary studies, to expand the scope of current research on employee silence. Third, future research could utilize the framework (Figures 1 and 2) presented in this paper as a roadmap to conduct further empirical studies. For example, future research could distinguish various forms of silence based on different targets, contents, or other perspectives, and establish further nomological networks. In addition, future research could investigate silence at the level of specific events or dyads, explore potential positive outcomes, or examine the variables associated with others' reactions and interpersonal relationships. Future research could also examine different perspectives, such as investigating employee silence on instant messaging platforms and incorporating the observer's role in the silence process. Fourth, future research could adopt a long-term dynamic perspective, capturing the evolution of employee silence over time or in response to specific events. Fifth, future research could study silence at the organizational or team level, exploring how organizational structure, policies, culture, or management practices influence overall silence within the organization or team, and the subsequent impact on the organization, team, or individual. Sixth, future research could examine silence from the emic perspective of Chinese culture, for example by exploring the relationship between Chinese cultural roots and the unique phenomenon of silence among Chinese employees.

Figure 1  
*Research findings of employee silence*

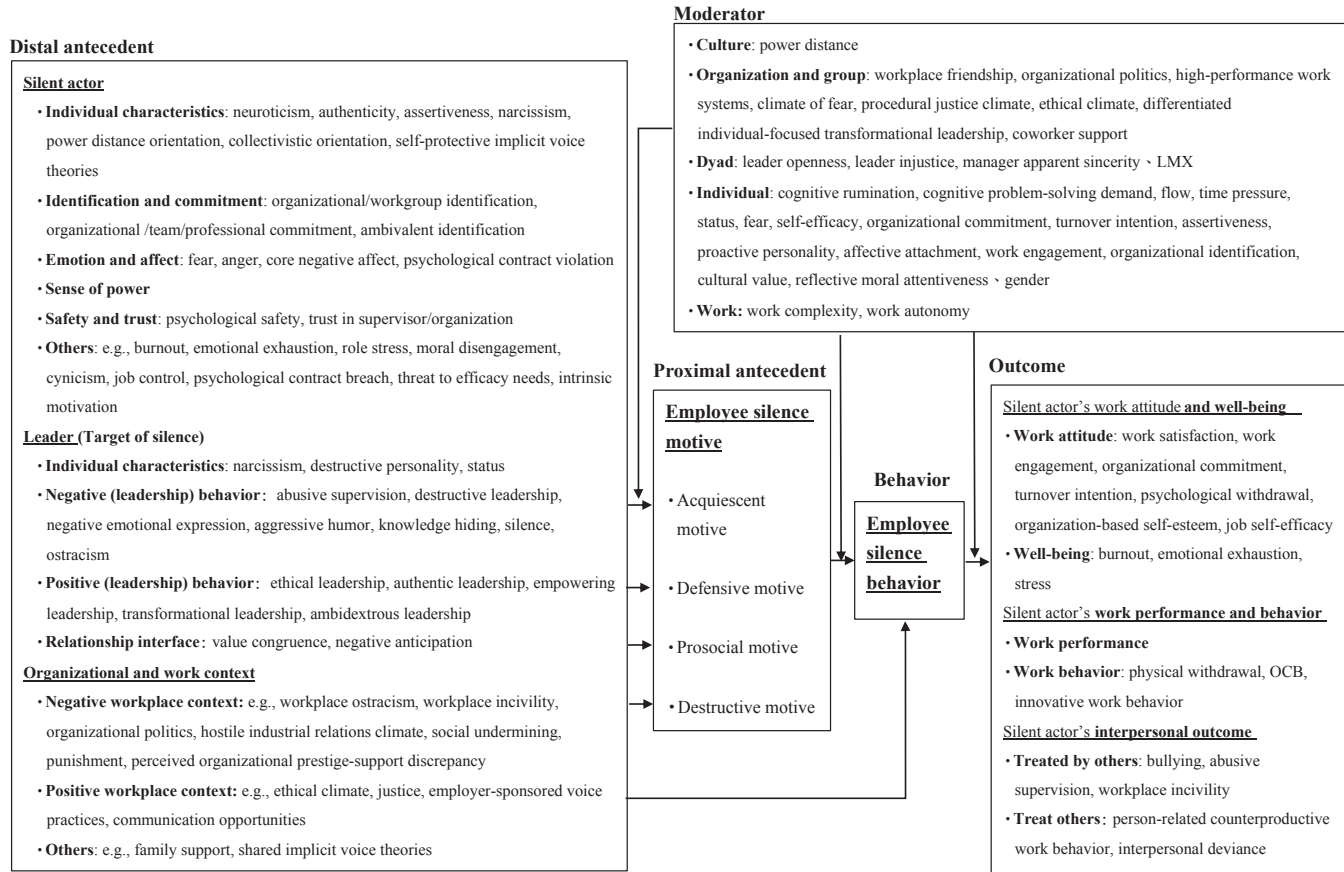


Figure 2  
*Indigenous research findings of Chinese employee silence*

