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Jiang, L.; Kosar Altinyelken, H.

**DOI**

[10.1080/17475759.2021.1877178](https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2021.1877178)

**Publication date**

2022

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Journal of Intercultural Communication Research

**License**

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[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Jiang, L., & Kosar Altinyelken, H. (2022). Understanding social integration of Chinese students in the Netherlands: The role of friendships. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 51(2), 191-207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2021.1877178>

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# Understanding Social Integration of Chinese Students in the Netherlands: The Role of Friendships

Lina Jiang and Hülya Kosar Altinyelken 

Graduate School of Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of 28 Chinese international students to enhance understanding of their social integration in the Dutch higher education institutions, with a focus on intercultural friendships. The findings indicate that establishing friendships with non-Chinese students is challenging due to several reasons: language comprehension/production, cultural distance, interests in different social activities, lack of initiatives from Dutch students, (perceived) prejudice and discrimination, and dependence on the Chinese community. The findings underscore the need for institutions to provide more support for Chinese students regarding linguistic competences and cultural understanding, while highlighting the importance of promoting an inclusive academic environment.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 September 2020  
Accepted 12 January 2021

## KEYWORDS

Internationalization of higher education; Chinese international students; social integration; intercultural friendship; cultural distance; The Netherlands

## Introduction

The number of international tertiary-level students has grown considerably in the last few decades, rising from 2 million in 1998 to 5.3 million in 2017 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019). Currently, English-speaking countries such as Australia, Canada, the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) are the most attractive destinations for international students, while Asian students make up the largest group of international students worldwide (OECD, 2019). Among the Asian countries, China, India, South Korea, Malaysia and Vietnam send the highest number of students abroad (Barnett et al., 2016). In Europe, countries have been making significant efforts to make their higher education offerings more attractive to students from other continents (European Commission [EC], 2005; De Wit et al., 2015). About 1.7 million international students undertook tertiary-level studies in host countries in Europe in 2017 (EC, 2020). As Asia is perceived as a large market whose students potentially have big purchasing power, Asian countries have been targeted as a source of international students by European countries such as the UK, the Netherlands and Germany (EC, 2005). For different regions and countries, the underlying reasons for the internationalization of higher education have been manifold, including social-cultural, political, economic and academic rationales (De Wit et al., 2015). However, some have

**CONTACT** Lina Jiang  [l.jiang@uva.nl](mailto:l.jiang@uva.nl); [nanajiang0426@gmail.com](mailto:nanajiang0426@gmail.com)

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argued that political and economic rationales are playing an increasingly important role, and that some higher education institutions have been financially motivated to expand international student enrolment (Choudaha, 2017; De Wit et al., 2015).

China has been the largest source of international students worldwide. According to China's Ministry of Education (MoE), nearly 5.86 million Chinese studied overseas in the past two decades. The number of Chinese international students reached 662,100 in 2018 (Ministry of Education, China, 2019). In Europe, Chinese accounted for 11.2% of the total number of international students in 2017 (EC, 2020), and they were the largest international student group in Germany, Ireland, Italy and the UK, and the second largest in France, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden (EC, 2020). The existing literature on Chinese international students has mostly investigated their experiences in English-speaking countries worldwide (e.g. Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Pan & Wong, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2013). Furthermore, many of these studies focused on students' academic life, such as their classroom participation (Y. R. Zhou et al., 2005), adaptation to critical thinking and argumentation (Durkin, 2008), learning style (Biemans & Van Mil, 2008), and difficulty in adjusting to the language of instruction (Li, 2017). Nevertheless, there has been less research on the social integration experiences of Chinese students (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017). Moreover, less attention has been given to Chinese students studying in non-English-speaking European countries. One of the few existing studies about Chinese students in the Netherlands also focused only on their experiences with classroom pedagogy (Jiang & Altinyelken, 2020).

Hence, this study addresses an issue so far lacking in scientific literature – Chinese students' social integration in a non-English-speaking context. The article will present and discuss the lived experiences of 28 Chinese international students from eight Dutch higher education institutions (HEIs), with a focus on their friendships with other students. The following research question guides the data collection and the analysis in this article: How do Chinese students perceive their experiences in establishing friendships with other students in the Dutch higher education system and what challenges do they encounter as far as becoming integrated into the student community?

The successful integration of international students is important not only to the student community, teachers and researchers, but also to Dutch society. At the individual level, international students who are socially separated may experience feelings of isolation, poor social and academic performance, and even risks to their personal safety (British Council, 2014). At the institutional level, since Dutch HEIs have been making considerable effort to attract and retain international talent, as well as to strengthen inclusive communities, the academic and social integration of students and staff has become a priority (Association of Universities in the Netherlands [VSNU] & Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences [VH], 2018). Our study focuses on friendships, because peer interaction is an important component of an individual's social life, and enough friendship support can lead to social integration (Tinto, 1975). Researchers have also found friendship formation by international students to be one of the most important factors for satisfaction, social support, and success in their studies (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Kudo & Simkin, 2003).

The article is structured as follows: in the next section, a review of literature on the social integration of international students is presented, with a focus on friendships, providing a conceptual and theoretical framework for this study. This is followed by

a description of the methodology. The findings are presented next, focusing on Chinese students' perceptions of and reflections on their experiences in establishing friendships with other students and challenges that they have encountered in trying to become integrated socially in the student community. Finally, the major findings and their implications are discussed, and suggestions for future research are considered.

## Theoretical underpinnings

Studies on international students have been on the rise in recent years. Scholars have conducted a range of research concerning international students' academic and social integration (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Li, 2017; Rienties et al., 2011, 2012; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017). Many studies have emphasized the significance of meeting international students' various academic and social needs (Choudaha, 2017; Mamiseishvili, 2012; Neri & Ville, 2008), in order to better support their learning experiences and be competitive in the higher education market.

## Social integration

Redmond and Bunyi (1993) defined social integration as the extent to which "an individual is able to assimilate into the social or relational network of a given culture" (p. 240). This term is used to reflect the extent to which international students adapt to the social life at the host university (Rienties et al., 2011) or how well international students initiate interactions and maintain interpersonal relations in the host country (Cao et al., 2016; Galchenko & van de Vijver, 2007). In current studies on international students in foreign academic settings, another concept, acculturation, has also been used frequently. Acculturation is "the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (Berry, 2005, p. 698). When international students with various backgrounds come to a new culture, they may experience a range of life changes, which are likely to result in stress and potential challenges. In this study, we regard social integration as also an acculturation process, in which students adapt to life at the host higher education institutions.

The importance of social integration was first formulated in Tinto's (1975) theoretical model of dropout from higher education. The model postulates that an individual's integration into the academic and social systems of his college relates most directly to his continuance at the college: "Other things being equal, the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college systems, the greater will be his commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion" (Tinto, 1975, p. 96). Academic performance and intellectual development are two important components of an individual's integration into the academic system, while within the social system of the college, peer-group interactions and faculty interactions are most related to individual social integration. Hence, students not only need to engage fully in the academic life of the institution, but they also need to participate in the learning community and develop interpersonal relationships in order to persist in their studies.

A number of recent studies have examined and extended Tinto's model, while exploring students' experiences with social integration. Mamiseishvili's (2012) study

emphasized that academic advising and student-faculty interactions played a significant role in the persistence of international students. As for peer-group interactions, Y. Zhou et al. (2008) found that support from students' social networks could contribute to their psychological well-being and have a large influence on their adaptation. Researchers also suggested other factors, such as students' participation in social activities organized on campus (Zhou & Zhang, 2014), and the institution's perceived reputation among students' social network (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013). Social life outside of the academic environment is also important for social integration, including sharing accommodations with other students and joining study groups or sports clubs (Rienties et al., 2011). Our study focuses on students' social interaction with peers and their experiences with establishing friendships.

### *Social integration and the social networks of international students*

Bochner et al. (1977) suggested three social networks related to the interpersonal relationships of international students: co-national network (friendships with students from the same country), host-national network (friendships with students from the host country), and multi-national network (friendships with students from other countries). Co-nationals provide close friendship for international students because of compatible cultural and ethnic values. Host-national relationships help students succeed at the university and adjust to the new culture, while multi-national friends and acquaintances can provide companionship for recreational activities. Hence, Bochner et al. (1977) indicated that the co-national bonds are of vital importance to international students, while pointing out that such bonds should not preclude being open to host-national or multi-national interactions.

However, a number of studies have generated different results concerning how international students build up their social networks. In a survey conducted by the Council for International Education in the UK (2004), 59% of international students were closely integrated with co-nationals or other international students, and only 7% were friends mainly with UK students. In Australia (Neri & Ville, 2008), international students were found to have a tendency to build close networks mostly with students from their own countries of origin. Most students managed to build up a circle of friends over time, which contributed to their own happiness and increased well-being. Hendrickson et al.'s (2011) research on international students in the US revealed that the majority of the students' networks were also made up of co-nationals. However, the students with a higher ratio of host-national friendships reported feeling significantly more satisfied, content and socially connected, and less homesick.

As for Chinese international students in particular, Spencer-Oatey et al.'s (2017) study reported that in the UK they socialized less with students from other countries than did students of other nationalities. However, their lack of motivation for social integration was identified as a key factor. In their research, some students of other nationalities commented that Chinese students did not want to integrate and that they hardly ever socialized with Chinese students. As a contrast, in Finland, a non-English-speaking European country, many Chinese students actually had close Finnish friends, according to Li and Pitkanen's research (2018). The authors maintained that Finnish higher education institutions contributed actively to international students' social integration by organizing intercultural communication programmes and promoting intercultural engagement between international and Finnish students.

### *Challenges for international students in establishing friendships*

International students encounter a range of challenges that impede their attempts to engage socially or become integrated into the student community. Cultural distance has large effects on intercultural communication competences such as adaptation, communication effectiveness and social integration (Redmond, 2000). The greater the distance is between two cultures, the greater challenge it will be for international students to adapt. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory takes a leading position when analysing and understanding the impact of cultural distance in social integration. Based on research concerning employees from 50 countries and 3 regions, Hofstede (1986) identified four major dimensions that define different cultures: Individualism versus Collectivism, Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Masculinity versus Femininity. Individualism or collectivism defines the extent to which individuals are attached to and integrated into groups. Power distance represents how much the less powerful people in a society accept and tolerate power inequalities. Uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent to which people are made nervous by uncertain, unstructured, unclear or unpredictable situations. In a masculine culture, different genders play distinct roles, while social roles are relatively overlapped for the genders in feminine societies. For instance, the Netherlands, Nordic European and Anglo-Saxon countries are rated low in power distance and high in individualism, whereas Asian countries such as China, Vietnam and Malaysia are rated high in both power distance and collectivism (Hofstede, 2001).

Consistent with Hofstede's theory, Ward and Kennedy (1993) found that students who made larger cross-cultural transitions (e.g. Malaysian and Singaporean students in New Zealand) experienced greater difficulties in interacting with host nationals, compared with those making smaller transitions (e.g. Malaysian students in Singapore). Pan and Wong (2011) conducted cross-cultural research comparing Chinese international students in Australia and those in Hong Kong. They also concluded that it is more difficult for Chinese students to adapt to a host society with greater cultural distance from their own. In more recent studies, Rienties and Tempelaar (2013) further specified that students from Southern Asia (Indonesia, Iran, India, Bangladesh) and, in particular, Confucian Asia (China, Vietnam, Taiwan) experience difficulties in adjusting to the academic and social life when studying in the Netherlands. They also found significant differences in social integration processes between different groups of international students because of differences in cultural distance. They found that "the social worlds of Dutch and international students (in general) are highly segregated" (Rienties et al., 2011, p. 131). It was more likely for Dutch students to have contact with Dutch students only, and international students had less contact with Dutch students than with other students. Meanwhile, students with a non-western background had less contact with both Dutch and western students, and they were also less satisfied with their social life. Rienties et al. (2011) pointed out that it is not clear whether the absence of social contact was due to the lack of effort by the Dutch students, the international students, or both.

Other challenges to establishing friendships have been identified in various studies. International students in Canada (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004) reported high degrees of difficulties in making friends because of miscommunication problems resulting from differing values, social rules, attitudes, and communication styles. Lee and Rice's research (2007) explored international students' experiences in the US and revealed many stories of

discrimination. Among the participants, a number of Asian students, including those from Vietnam, India, Japan and China, reported significant discrimination ranging from inhospitality and misperceptions about their cultures, to more direct abuse such as verbal insults, and even physical attacks both on- and off-campus. Such experiences hampered students' motivation to interact with locals. Language comprehension is also a prominent factor affecting the development of intercultural friendships (Kudo & Simkin, 2003). Hence, international students with poorer English proficiency had less contact with local students in the US and experienced more difficulties adjusting both psychologically and socio-culturally (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). In Schartner's (2015) study, a perceived lack of common conversational topics and the presence of large numbers of international students were found to contribute to the segregation between international students and UK students. For Chinese students in the UK, factors such as personality and emotional satisfaction from socializing with students with a similar background have also been identified as barriers to establishing friendships with other students (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017).

## Methodology

This study draws on data from fieldwork conducted in the Netherlands between October 2016 and March 2017. Before the start of the research, ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the first author's university. An exploratory and interpretive approach was adopted, as the research focused on the lived experiences of the Chinese international students. The qualitative research method allowed an insightful exploration of the students' narratives while offering rich descriptions (Hill, 2012) of their social integration experiences, with a focus on establishing friendships.

The Chinese students were contacted by the first author through an open invitation sent to student groups on WeChat, a multi-function social media, message and mobile payment application widely used by Chinese. Twenty-eight students, who were studying/studied at eight Dutch HEIs, agreed to take part in the interviews. The last four participants were selected purposefully to get an equal number of females and males. Informed written consent was obtained from all the participants. They were assured that the anonymity and confidentiality of their data would be ensured. The sample included nine students enrolled in bachelor's and nineteen in master's programmes. More than half of them were from a Faculty of Economics and Business. The length of stay in the Dutch HEIs varied from three months to four years (See Table 1 below for more information on the participants.)

Data were collected by the first author through 24 face-to-face and four Skype interviews. As she and all of the participants are native speakers of Chinese, the interviews were conducted individually in Chinese. The interviews lasted between 40 and 80 minutes, and were audio-recorded with the permission of the students. They were also informed by the interviewer that

**Table 1.** Background information on participants ( $N = 28$ ).

	Gender	Age (years)	Level of study	Faculty enrolled with	Length of stay
Students	Male: 14 Female: 14	18–33	Bachelor's: 9 Master's: 19	Economics and business (E&B): 16 Humanities: 4 Science: 3 Social and behavioural sciences (SBS): 5	Up to 1 year (<1y): 11 1–2 years (1–2y): 10 More than 2 years (>2y): 7

the recorder would be switched off if they wanted to withdraw from the study. The interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions about their views of their social integration experiences, particularly with establishing friendships with other students and challenges they encountered. Hence the participants had more freedom to share their experiences, while providing more in-depth information.

Themes in the collected data were identified and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim in Chinese, and the transcripts were loaded into the ATLAS.ti software programme. Based on the literature review, the first code list was developed. The transcripts were then coded using the code list. During the process of coding and reading the transcripts, a few new codes were added. The adapted final list better addressed and incorporated emerging themes, including language comprehension and production, cultural distance, lack of initiatives from Dutch students, (perceived) prejudice and discrimination, and dependence on the Chinese community. Summaries were made and illustrative quotations were extracted for each theme. Main findings were based on the analysed data. Quotations that illustrated the key findings were translated into English wherever necessary. All student names used in reporting the findings are pseudonyms.

## Findings

The Chinese students reflected on their social integration experiences in the Netherlands and confirmed that social interaction and friendships with other students are of the greatest importance to them. However, they were not very satisfied with their overall experiences. The majority of their social networks were with Chinese friends, and they lived in a social world that was segregated from Dutch students. Despite the efforts that they put into making Dutch friends, they did not succeed in establishing many meaningful host-national contacts. Furthermore, even though the Chinese students appeared more satisfied with their experiences of interacting with students of other nationalities, they had very few close relationships with other international students, particularly with non-Asian students. Hence, the students perceived their level of social integration as low or believed that they had not integrated well into the student community.

The following sections present the challenges that they encountered while trying to establish friendships with other students. These include language comprehension and production, cultural distance, interests in different social activities, lack of initiatives from Dutch students, (perceived) prejudice and discrimination, and dependence on the Chinese community.

### *Language comprehension and production*

Language comprehension and production has been identified as playing a very important role in students' social interaction with other students. Both a lack of fluency in English and students' limited understanding in Dutch were challenges to establishing friendships. All of the participants were studying/studied in English-speaking programmes. Some students found it rather challenging to express themselves fully in English, due to their limited vocabulary and not enough previous practice in speaking English. Other students pointed out that they always felt challenged when hanging out with Dutch students who shifted from English to Dutch:



When I talk to one Dutch student, she or he always talks to me in English. But when I hang out with more Dutch students, they began to talk more in Dutch. I understand that, because I also feel more comfortable when I speak Chinese. But then you will never feel close to them because you don't speak the same mother tongue. (Olivia: Female/25/MA/E&B/1-2y)

Most students showed interest in learning Dutch, but none of them progressed further than the beginner level because they already had busy study schedules. The Dutch language served not only as a tool for communication, but also as a representation of one's non-Dutch identity. Quite a number of students maintained that the language issue deprived them of their sense of belonging:

I have difficulty in understanding Dutch, and then it always reminds me of my identity. I am not emphasizing my nationality as Chinese, but as a foreigner - I do not see myself as very different from, for example, an American, because we are both outsiders, and we don't belong here. (Leo: Male/24/BA/E&B/>2y)

### **Cultural distance**

Cultural distance was a major issue impacting the social interaction of Chinese students with Dutch and other international students, particularly non-Asian students. In response to what cultural differences impressed them most while living and studying in the Netherlands, many students identified "Dutch directness" as a typical Dutch characteristic. This direct way of communication at times left the Chinese students feeling uncomfortable or even embarrassed. Some mentioned that they were used to speaking in an indirect way, so as not to hurt others' feelings. However, they experienced that Dutch students always stated everything directly without realizing that their words could hurt others:

My Dutch classmate said to me, "Your English is not so good, so maybe you could take some English lessons . . ." I know she wanted to help improve my writing, but I felt so ashamed and I really wanted to dig a hole and crawl in. Since my childhood, I have always been a good student. Nobody ever said anything like "you are not good at this or that". (Nancy: Female/29/MA/SBS/1-2y)

Quite a few students remarked that Dutch students and Chinese students are totally different during discussions: the Dutch tend to speak their mind freely, even though they might sound aggressive, while the Chinese prefer to maintain harmony among discussants and avoid conflicts:

If my Dutch classmates find your ideas differ from theirs, they would speak up, and insist on their own opinions. Sometimes they could sound a bit aggressive. However, the Chinese would rather find a balance between the two different opinions, in order to avoid arguments. (Alan: Male/18/BA/Humanities/<1y)

According to the participants, Chinese students found it challenging to constantly confront others, whereas Dutch students seemed to find pleasure in argumentation.

Nevertheless, one student regarded this direct way of communication as a Dutch way of helping people. She commented that by pointing out people's mistakes or problems directly, Dutch students are able to help others improve in certain aspects:

They speak directly, so it is easy and simple to get along with them. As long as you get used to it, you know this is part of their culture and this is actually better, as you won't

misunderstand each other. You know they are not impolite and this is their way of trying to help and being nice. (Laura: Female/33/MA/SBS/>2y)

Laura was the only one out of the 28 students who expressed appreciation of such directness, while the majority of the participants found it difficult to adjust themselves to such a way of communicating.

All of the students reported having classmates from different countries, thus from various cultural backgrounds. Different background knowledge represented another challenge to communicating with other nationalities for Chinese students. Many participants faced great difficulty in understanding jokes and humour, or even having conversations with others. Some students were impressed by how non-Asian students could chitchat with one another, while many of their fellow Chinese students were making arduous efforts to have conversations with non-Chinese students. Godwin expressed his frustration at the fact that his efforts at trying to socialize never paid off:

I don't think I can handle social life here at all . . . my hard work in socializing never paid off. I forced myself to join in parties or events with other nationalities and tried hard to communicate with them. But sometimes they didn't even understand me . . . or at times we just couldn't get each other's humour. I felt really awkward. I guess it is because of our different cultural backgrounds. (Godwin: Male/23/MA/SBS/1-2y)

Many students recognized the communications gap between them and other students, particularly non-Asian students. Henry shared these sentiments, and emphasized that the common topics among students were of vital importance because they were the key to keeping their conversations going:

I noticed that when we talked with students of other nationalities, we began to talk about our studies again eventually. That is because we don't watch the same TV shows or read the same books. Some Chinese friends don't even read news here . . . here is what went wrong: we don't have the same topics. How can we keep our conversations going? (Henry: Male/26/MA/E&B/1-2y)

Many students claimed that they tried hard to narrow this communications gap, whereas it remained difficult and challenging. Consequently, such a gap discouraged them from becoming friends with their non-Asian peers, while strengthening their social networks with other Asians or within the Chinese student community.

### ***Interests in different social activities***

The Chinese students also identified a sharp contrast between the Chinese way of socializing and the "Western way". All of the students agreed that the Chinese take pleasure in communicating with each other over the dinner table, while their Western or non-Asian peers prefer going to parties where they drink, chat and dance to music. Most of the respondents found the "Western party culture" problematic:

The music was so loud that you couldn't hear what the other person was talking about. I don't understand what on earth was interesting about that. (Kyle: Male/23/BA/E&B/>2y)

They like to drink and chat in the cold wind. It [going to a party] doesn't sound attractive to me at all. It is very likely that I will end up drinking alone. I don't think I can integrate with

them like that, and if you don't take the initiative, neither will they. (Emily: Female/23/MA/Humanities/<1y)

However challenging it appeared to be to integrate into the party culture, most respondents expressed their strong desire to do so. Nevertheless, going to parties was not what they were interested in, after all. Hence, some students found themselves in a dilemma:

Sometimes I wish to enjoy some quiet moments just for myself. But I am afraid that I would no longer be part of the student community if I always refuse their party invitations. Then at one point I have to force myself to join in the party. (Justine: Female/23/BA/E&B/>2y)

Only two (out of 28) considered going to parties to be a valuable opportunity to communicate with other students. One had the criticism that too many of their Chinese friends focused their attention on their mobile phones over the dinner table when they were supposed to interact:

I really hate it when they only look at their phones at table. As a contrast, at parties you have to stay close to others, so you always put your phone away and ask for permission if you want to check it. I really appreciate it, as people show mutual respect. (Felicity: Female/23/MA/E&B/1-2y)

The other student emphasized the benefits of face-to-face communication, for enhancing mutual understanding as well as strengthening friendships, and at times, receiving important information or even helpful suggestions about their studies.

### *Lack of initiatives from Dutch students*

Despite the challenges that they faced when interacting with their Dutch peers, the Chinese students tended to think highly of their friendliness. Some students commented that Dutch students are very friendly on campus, and that Dutch students always greet them and smile at them, even when they do not know each other. As a sharp contrast, establishing close friendships with Dutch classmates remained difficult for many students. They recalled that their Dutch classmates hardly ever initiated contact or showed any interest in befriending them:

I think the Dutch are nice - they care and help strangers. This kind of friendliness is not fake. However, I find it strange that I can never make good friends with Dutch classmates. It seems that they do not need us as their friends. They do not initiate any meetings. I feel I am somewhere between a stranger and a friend for them. (Holly: Female/26/MA/E&B/1-2y)

There were certain assumptions among the Chinese students about why Dutch students did not share the same urge to establish friendships. Some students thought that Dutch students grew up in that country and already had a stable friend circle before going to college. Some assumed that Dutch students attached great importance to personal life and would rather spend more time with their family. Others also believed that Dutch students filled their schedules with studying, part-time jobs, student associations or sports clubs, leaving no time for new friendships:

It is easy for Dutch students to get part-time jobs because they speak the language. I also noticed that there are more Dutch students than other students in many student associations. Maybe they already have a busy social life because of these, so don't have time for us. (Nelson: Male/26/MA/Science/1-2y)

### *(Perceived) prejudice and discrimination*

Some students associated prejudice and stereotyping with their experiences of being questioned about things that happen in China. The most common questions asked by their non-Chinese peers and even professors included whether Chinese students eat dogs, cats or insects, about their opinions concerning the Cultural Revolution, internet censorship, blocking of Facebook and Google, and about the serious pollution in China. One student shared his experience as follows:

About eating dogs, they take it personally, especially those who have dogs ... People asked me, “Do Chinese eat dogs?” Even after I explained we don’t, they still think so, and I have to explain that I don’t, my family doesn’t and my friends don’t ... but they think you [Chinese] are all the same. You feel this is prejudice and discrimination. (Henry: Male/26/MA/E&B/1-2y)

The students emphasized that being confronted with such questions as Henry mentioned had a negative impact on their self-esteem, while other questions concerning “sensitive topics” made them uncomfortable. Bruce agreed with Henry’s view, but further explained that he believed that most people were just curious, rather than malicious. If that was the case, he suggested, students should not take those questions as personal or offensive:

I also asked my Indian classmates questions about the pollution of the Ganges and unequal distribution of educational resources in their country. They didn’t take these questions as offensive. I asked them because they grew up there and know better. It was nothing personal. They also asked me about corruption and I told them it was worse in China than in India. (Bruce: Male/21/BA/SBS/<1y)

Another student also commented that living in a completely new environment, sometimes students are too concerned and sensitive, so that they exaggerate such problems. It is important for them to understand that most people mean no harm and are just eager to hear about different perspectives from insiders. He further suggested that “if it is a personal attack, or an insult, we don’t have to tolerate it. We must fight back, and protect our own rights”. (Martin: Male/26/MA/E&B/1-2y)

### *Dependence on the Chinese community*

The majority of the students reported that their best friends were still friends who were back in China, and that they felt closer to their Chinese friends in the Netherlands than to those of other nationalities. They also emphasized that their Chinese friends relieved their homesickness and loneliness. Several of them noted that it was difficult to make non-Chinese friends with no barrier at all, because there were always cultural differences between them:

I have friends with whom I can go to parties and have fun. We can even travel together, or visit each other’s family. But we grew up in totally different cultures, speaking different languages. It is too hard to reach that point where there is no barrier at all. With Chinese friends, it is so much easier, and we feel much closer. (Leona: Female/25/MA/Science/>2y)

All of the Chinese students agreed that there is a well-developed Chinese community in the Netherlands. There are many WeChat student groups where they can easily reach other Chinese students. WeChat is also a platform where they can search for information. For example, if they want to know how to register at the municipality or if they want to

find someone to bike to a national park with, they can find the answer or a companion from WeChat groups. Several of them maintained that they would have no problem living their life by using only WeChat – they did not have to contact anyone of another nationality, nor did they have to check information on Dutch websites – WeChat helped them with everything. However, quite a number of students found this rather problematic. They underscored their desire to become integrated into other student groups:

Yes, you can live a normal life without any non-Chinese friends. But I know many of us want to walk past this barrier. We did not choose to study because we wanted to make Chinese friends in the Netherlands. I think many students should ask themselves why they are here. We wish to communicate with Dutch and international students. (Daisy: Female/22/MA/E&B/<1y)

Since Chinese students were dependent on their Chinese friends and the Chinese community, they were often with a group of Chinese friends. This separated them from other student groups, making it even more difficult to establish contacts with others.

## Conclusion and discussion

This study aims to contribute to the discussion about international students' social integration, by providing an exploration of Chinese students' lived experiences in Dutch higher education. It focused on Chinese students' perceptions of their social integration, particularly their experiences in establishing friendships with other students, and investigated the challenges that they have encountered while seeking to become integrated into the student community.

The findings indicate that the Chinese students mostly befriended other Chinese students, and had few friends of other nationalities. Unlike Chinese students in Finland (Li & Pitkanen, 2018), who made many local friends, the social worlds of Chinese and Dutch students were "segregated". Hence the Chinese students perceived their social integration experiences as dissatisfying and considered their level of integration to be low. Establishing friendships with Dutch and other international (especially non-Asian) students was challenging for them due to a range of reasons.

First of all, as confirmed in other studies (Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Li & Pitkanen, 2018; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), language comprehension and production is one of the major issues hampering international students' interaction with other students. In this study, Chinese students also faced linguistic challenges as well – in both English and Dutch. Their lack of fluency in English impacted the students' academic adjustment, as prior research has shown (Jiang & Altinyelken, 2020), and at the same time, it impeded fulfilment of students' desire to socialize and make friends. Furthermore, unfamiliarity with the Dutch language further hindered their communication or contacts with Dutch students. Our study also highlights the nuances behind the language challenge, which has not been addressed in previous studies: being unable to speak the local language, Chinese students often saw themselves as outsiders, which created a strong sense of not belonging in the host society.

The findings of our study are consistent with Hofstede's (1986) cultural dimensions theory and what has been reported in other studies (Pan & Wong, 2011; Redmond, 2000; Rienties et al., 2011; Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013), demonstrating that greater cultural distance brings more setbacks in meeting students' social needs and communicating effectively with other students. Meanwhile, our study offers rich descriptions of Chinese students' daily experiences with establishing friendships and highlights their nuanced interactions with Dutch students

and other non-Asian international students. As Hofstede (1986) presented in his analysis, in collectivist societies, harmony in learning situations should always be maintained, and no one should be made to lose face; in individualist societies, confrontation can be beneficial, and face-consciousness is weak. The Chinese culture is indirect, and non-confrontational. Conversely, the Dutch culture and consequently classroom discussions can be rather direct and at times confrontational. Hence, as for the interaction with Dutch classmates in particular, Chinese students perceived their way of communicating as “too direct”, and arguing in classroom discussions as “too confrontational”, which at times engendered discomfort and embarrassment for them. As for the multi-national social network, there appear to be major differences between the Chinese students and the non-Asian students in terms of cultural backgrounds, ways of thinking and expressing thoughts, and interests in social activities. Such differences created barriers to communication and social interaction – the Chinese students identified the difficulty of adjusting to the “Western” party culture and challenges in understanding jokes and humour or even having normal conversations with non-Asian students.

Furthermore, our findings also draw attention to the challenges that Chinese students encountered in the unique Dutch-speaking context. Our findings suggest that Chinese students are not the only ones who stick together – so do the Dutch students. According to Chinese students, Dutch students do not share the same urge to socialize with other students, because Dutch students already have stable friend circles, or attach great importance to personal life, or are busy with their own social life. Hence, the lack of social initiatives from Dutch students is also one of the challenges Chinese students saw to establishing host-national friendships. In addition, a few students reported that they encountered biased and stereotyped questions about China or Chinese nationals on campus. Even though most of the participants confirmed that they did not receive unfriendly treatment, such (perceived) discriminatory incidents still had a negative impact on some students’ self-esteem and discouraged them from engaging more with other nationalities. Furthermore, our findings also highlight another factor which has not been given attention to in previous studies: Chinese students were found to be very dependent on the Chinese community in the Netherlands, due to well-developed social media platforms such as WeChat. Because the students were satisfied with their co-national friendships and were fully supported by WeChat student groups, this community became a safe comfort zone for them. The longer they were attached to it, the more difficult it became to step outside of it, despite their desire to make other friends.

Our findings are in line with other studies demonstrating that co-national friendships offer emotional support to Chinese students and relieve their homesickness and loneliness (Cao et al., 2016; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017). It could seem that it is therefore not necessary for Chinese students to become integrated into the university community, since they have social support from the Chinese community. However, as revealed by other research findings (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Ward & Kennedy, 1993), students who integrated socially and had local and multi-national friendships encountered fewer social difficulties and were more satisfied with their life overseas. More importantly, unlike Chinese students in other studies (e.g. Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017), who claimed that they were seeking diplomas instead of social interaction, the Chinese students in our study generally were not satisfied with the situation – they wished to eliminate the barriers to establishing friendships, to become integrated within the student community and to adapt to the multicultural environment. Hence, to facilitate their own transition process, it would be beneficial for Chinese students to first extend or step

outside their comfort zone, and then acquaint themselves with the multi-cultural international community. Educators, on the other hand, need to be more aware of the difficulties that Chinese students experience, besides their challenges in academic life, and facilitate their integration process. Host higher education institutions could provide support in various ways, such as introducing courses to improve students' linguistic competences and intercultural communication skills, organizing activities to promote mutual understanding among students, and creating more opportunities for students to become socially integrated.

As the survey of international students in the Netherlands (Dutch National Students Association, Dutch Student Union & Erasmus Student Network the Netherlands, 2019) indicated, Chinese students are not alone in this – more than three quarters of international students would like more interaction with Dutch students. Some of the reasons for not feeling integrated are international students' limited knowledge about Dutch culture and traditions, and Dutch students' unwelcoming attitude towards international students. In that sense, international students are not the only ones who need to make efforts to become integrated. It is crucial to raise the awareness among Dutch students that seeking integration with other students would enrich their experiences and enhance their cultural understanding. Higher education institutions and policy makers could campaign to stimulate Dutch students to embrace the multi-cultural community, to evoke their curiosity about intercultural friendships, and to motivate them to become integrated with other students. Considering that a few Chinese students perceived their experiences as discriminatory, more efforts are also needed to ensure an inclusive student community for international students within higher education (VSNU & VH, 2018).

This study has some limitations, because it only explored the experiences of 28 Chinese students from eight higher education institutions across the Netherlands. Hence, the findings cannot be generalized to all Chinese students studying in the Netherlands. In addition, the reasons behind Dutch students' lack of initiatives to become socially integrated were based on the perceptions of the Chinese students; Dutch students were not involved in this research. Without their feedback, it is difficult to determine whether such assumptions are truly the reasons for the absence of social contact. Future studies could consider investigating how Dutch students' perceptions are similar to or different from Chinese students' assumptions, in order to achieve better understanding and facilitate their mutual integration more effectively.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Notes on contributors

*Lina Jiang* is a PhD candidate at the Department of Child Development and Education, the University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Her research is concerned with internationalization of higher education, with a focus on Chinese tertiary-level students' experiences in academic learning and social integration in the Netherlands.

*Dr. Hülya Kosar Altinyelken* is an assistant professor at the Department of Child Development and Education, the University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Her research interests cover a wide range of issues, including mindfulness in education, citizenship, and identity development and social integration among Muslim youth in the Netherlands.

**ORCID**

Hülya Kosar Altinyelken  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2178-0862>

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