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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Infrastructuring arrival and homemaking in COVID-19 times: Experiences of newcomer Chinese students in Dutch cities

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Abstract

This paper examines the experiences of newcomer Chinese students in Dutch cities during the COVID-19 pandemic, building on three strands of literature on (i) arrival infrastructure, (ii) homemaking and (iii) the nature of conflating digital and offline spaces. Based on qualitative research findings from two research projects, the paper illustrates resilience among the students in infrastructuring their arrival and making a new home in an unfamiliar city that was rather inaccessible due to recurrent social distancing restrictions and incidents of 'Corona racism'. Narratives of the research participants offer insights into their arrival experiences and homemaking practices in key interlinked life spaces, namely academic, residential and socialising spaces as well as spaces of interactions with the broader (unwelcoming) society. In addition to students' agency, our findings demonstrate the importance of (transnational) communal care and the role of the digital in students' arrival experiences and homemaking practices.

KEYWORDS

arrival infrastructure, Chinese students, COVID-19, homemaking, on/offline geographies, the Netherlands

1 | INTRODUCTION

COVID-related lockdowns and social distancing measures have had a significant, though uneven, impact on all walks of life in our society worldwide. Since the onset of the pandemic, research has repeatedly concluded the predominantly disruptive effects of COVID-19 on international students across the globe (Bista et al., 2021). The main findings underline the effects of the pandemic on students' mobility (staying or leaving) decision (Harder & Mullaney, 2021; Wang, 2021), physical and mental well-being (Koo, 2021; Xu, Su, et al., 2021; Yassin et al., 2021), academic experiences (Fass-Holmes, 2021) and financial situation (Cairns et al., 2022; Coffey et al., 2021). Further to these challenges, students 'of colours' were found to be confronted with COVID-related racialisation and discrimination (Al Jazeera, 2020; Koo, 2021; Wang, 2021). These incidents have also been observed in the Netherlands (Cao & Chieu, 2021; Misirlis et al., 2020; van Hooijdonk et al., 2022).

In this paper, we focus on the experiences of newcomer Chinese students in Dutch cities during the pandemic. We examine their interactions with arrival infrastructures, aiming to explore how they differ for international students compared to that for other migrants. Our main contribution lies in a dynamic and dialectic perspective on arrival infrastructures, demonstrating how such structures are not static networks that determines newcomers' experiences. Rather,

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migrants' exercise their agencies in adapting and actively shaping them through processes of homemaking. Personal agency and instances of community care mediate homemaking practices among newly arriving students. These practices ultimately become part of arrival infrastructures that contain existing elements.

Specifically, we uncover how newcomer students navigated and made physical and digital spaces in their new 'home' city. Conceptually, we build on and link three strands of literature in migration and social geography, namely that on arrival infrastructure (e.g., Meeus et al., 2019; Wang, 2022; Wessendorf, 2022), homemaking (Boccagni, 2023; Duyvendak, 2011; Leung, 2004; Mallett, 2004) and the nature of conflating digital and offline spaces (Bork-Hüffer & Yeoh, 2017). Empirically, we draw on our on/offline research to illustrate the challenges experienced and strategies adopted by newly arrived Chinese students in getting acquainted with and embedding themselves in their unfamiliar physical and social environments in the Netherlands. We document the effects of the recurrent lockdowns, social distancing, studying at home, (fear of) stigmatisation on our interlocuters' well-being and their strategies in building a new life in the not-so-accessible environment. We employ an agentic approach, arguing that it provides a more nuanced understanding of the relevance of personal agency and community care in shaping arrival infrastructures.

In what follows, we first introduce our research context and methodology. After that, we provide a review and discussion of the relevant literature. The subsequent sections present our empirical findings and reflection. Finally, we conclude with some implications of our research in and beyond the field of international student mobility.

2 | RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The pandemic made a great impact on our world's mobility patterns, also on Chinese outbound student mobility. In 2020, the number of students abroad dropped to about 450,000 (Center for China and Globalisation, 2024), as compared to more than 700,000 in 2019 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020). The Netherlands is a popular destination among Chinese students in Europe. According to figures from Nuffic, the Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education, 5610 degree students from China studied in the Netherlands in 2022, ranking fourth in number after those from Germany (22,775), Italy (7633) and Romania (6717). The figure made China the largest source of non-European students and the only non-European Economic Area country in the top 10 ranking (Nuffic, 2023). The rising popularity of the Netherlands among Chinese students (and their parents) can be accounted for by the rising desire and ability among Chinese families in sending their children for education abroad, as well as the efforts in internationalisation of higher education in the Netherlands. According to the survey conducted by (Hong et al., 2017), Chinese students are attracted by the quality and low tuition fees charged by Dutch universities (as compared to other English-speaking destinations such as the USA and the UK) and the perceived egalitarian social atmosphere.

This paper draws on two research projects that examined the lived experiences of Chinese students in the Netherlands during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The first project was motivated by the rise of racialised acts against and discourse about Chinese-looking people in Europe during the early phase of the pandemic. We focused on the newcomer students' experiences of discrimination (Leung et al., forthcoming), their agency to navigate and build relationships with and in their new study/home place, and how they were embedded in circuits of care locally and transnationally (Leung, 2022). We conducted interviews with 21 (12 female and 9 male, self-identified) Chinese people. They ranged between 21 and 29 years old. Among the participants, 14 were students, 3 recent graduates and 4 working in the Netherlands. Most participants (19 out of 21) were living in culturally diverse cities such as Utrecht, Rotterdam and Amsterdam. The research was conducted in three phases during the COVID-19 pandemic: (i) May and June 2020, (ii) October 2020 and (iii) June 2021. The second, on-going research started in March 2022. This follow-up study pays particular attention to (digital) spatial practices among Chinese students in Amsterdam during the different phases of and after the pandemic. We conducted interviews with 16 (8 female and 8 male, self-identified) Chinese Bachelor- and Master-level students who arrived for the academic year 2020/2021 or 2021/2022. None of them participated in the first study. Participants were recruited through the researchers' personal networks and snowball sampling, by which our interlocuters introduced us to other eligible participants. Pseudonyms are used for all individuals.

Depending on the COVID regulation at time and/or preference of our research participants, the interviews were conducted either in-person or online (via Zoom or WeChat[1]). The interviews in the first project were conducted by Yanbo (male, of Mainland Chinese background, Mandarin speaker). In the second project, three of us — Yanbo, Yiwen (female, with Mainland Chinese background, Mandarin speaker) and Aly (male, non-Chinese, non-Mandarin speaker) — were engaged in the conversations. All three researchers have studied as international students in the Netherlands. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min. In some cases repeated conversations were conducted. They were recorded with participants' consent. We analysed the interview transcripts using both inductive and deductive coding, following an iterative approach. In addition to interviews, we gathered data through content analyses of Chinese official speeches and policy documents, related news reports and user-generated social media posts, as well as (online) participation observation. In both projects, we made utmost efforts to collect diverse views. Yet, our findings are highly contextualised. They cannot be interpreted as generalisation for all the Chinese students in the Netherlands.

[1]WeChat is a Chinese multi-functional app. It is used widely in and beyond China for text messaging, hold-to-talk voice messaging, broadcast messaging, video conferencing, video games, mobile payment, sharing of photographs and videos, as well as location sharing.

3 | ARRIVAL INFRASTRUCTURE, HOMEMAKING AND ON/OFFLINE GEOGRAPHIES–A CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION

To map out and understand the arrival and 'landing' processes of the newcomer students during the peculiar pandemic period, we first draw on the scholarship on arrival infrastructure. Meeus et al. (2019) define 'arrival infrastructures' as the 'elements of a city that newcomers interact with on arrival, which later shapes their social mobilities, focusing on 'how and where people find stability' (p. 1). Elements of these 'infrastructures' include 'concentrations of institutions, organisations, social spaces, and actors that specifically facilitate migrant arrivals' (Wessendorf 2022, p. 173). Beyond mapping out arrival infrastructures as networks of organisational and material architectures, hence the 'hardware', scholars have also emphasised their dynamic and processual nature. Meeus et al. (2019) draw attention to the 'infrastructur*ing* practices' of diverse actors. This emphasis on actors can be traced back to much earlier work by Simone (2004) who highlights the importance of people with his concept of 'people as infrastructures'. As such, as Meeus et al. (2019, p. 2) maintain 'the notion of arrival infrastructures emphasises the continuous and manifold "infrastructuring practices" or "infrastructuring work" by a range of actors'. These practices can be formal and informal and are situated in specific contexts. Furthermore, Meeus et al., 2019) highlight that 'infrastructures' are continuously constituted through infrastructuring practices, highlighting the dynamic nature of these infrastructures. The nature of infrastructures is therefore dependent on the practices that form them, ranging from institutionalised practices that are more structured, such as refugee reception centres or university orientation programmes, to informal networks that could have been culminated over generations of migrants. Among others, Wajsberg and Schapendonk (2022) and van Liempt (2023) show in their research how migrants use and/or connect counter-hegemonic infrastructures to move, stay, live and practice solidarity. Using an agency-focused approach, we also aim to highlight agentic practices by students and newcomers that contribute to shaping arrival infrastructures.

In extant scholarship, there is a tendency to focus on the arrival of refugees (e.g., Kox & Van Liempt, 2022; Meeus et al., 2018, 2019). Furthermore, there is a skewed emphasis on permeance (Schrooten & Meeus, 2020) and integration (Wessendorf & Gembus, 2024). Our research contributes to the literature on arrival infrastructures by focusing on the infrastructures pertinent to international students, whose experiences have been sidelined in this regard. Perhaps due to their (assumed) more privileged status, freedom to move around and lead their lives (but see Lee et al., 2017; Streitwieser et al., 2020; Tran & Hoang, 2020 for other narratives), hardly any attention has been paid on the nature and working of arrival infrastructure concerning them. International students have different opportunities and constraints, as compared to other mobile populations. Their arrivals are mediated by different institutional contexts, such as being on study visas, and involve more prominent infrastructuring practices by actors such as universities or other students. Such particularities can result in distinct practices by students that are aimed at momentary 'stability' (drawing on Meeus, Arnaut, and Van Heur's conceptualisation) rather than longer-term integration. Temporariness of international students' residency and the uncertainties in their study-to-work life phase shape the meaning of arrival and homemaking. These in turn affect the ways how future positionalities are negotiated, making their arrival, as a temporary materialisation of being somewhere (Meeus et al., 2019), a 'point of departure on which new becomings can emerge'(Papadopoulos et al., 2008, p. 217).

In making sense of student newcomers' arrival experiences, we draw on the conceptualisation of homemaking. As Duyvendak (2011) maintains, homemaking and a sense of belonging are essential or even existential among migrants. The importance of these processes have drawn the attention of many researchers in migration studies. Overall, home has a positive connotation. It is considered as a safe place, characterised by senses of familiarity, trust and belonging (Duyvendak, 2011; Mallett, 2004; Miranda-Nieto & Boccagni, 2020). While less prominent, a series of critical research has underlined the negative, oppressive aspects of home (Mangena & Nyambi, 2022; Moran, 2002). Extant literature has also underlined the materiality of homemaking processes. For instance, Kochan (2016) and van Liempt and Staring (2021) examine the importance of the physical space of home and its decoration. Bailey (2017) and Miranda-Nieto and Boccagni (2020) study the role of food practices, while Duyvendak (2011) focuses on intangible and yet powerful senses of smells and sounds in the process of homemaking. These analyses show that homemaking is a multi-dimensional process. In her early work, Leung (2004) illustrates how homemaking among Chinese migrants in Germany was about intersecting processes of economic and socio-cultural embedding in multi-local and transnational spaces. Beyond examining sense of belonging and diaspora subjectivities in home-making, Leung studied how migrant entrepreneurs navigated broader structures that span local to transnational scales, move (goods and people), (re)create and sell 'ethnic' food and European tourism attractions to their co-ethnics, which in turn feed into the making of home in different senses. These findings illustrate how migrants are both agentic and subsumed under structural influences. As they make home in a material sense (such as earning an income, building a house), they also make an impact on the social and cultural meanings and practices of their multiple homes located in transnational space. Transnational/translocal aspects of homemaking has inspired a growing body of work in migration studies (e.g., Baran & Gülmez, 2020; Kim & Smets, 2020; Leung, 2004; Sandu, 2013; Trapp, 2015). This paper advances this line of research, with a 'COVID update'.

While we foreground migrants' agency in homemaking, the impact of broader political, economic, social and cultural contexts and processes cannot be played down. The role of the 'host' society in opening or closing off spaces for homemaking and belonging is obvious (Boccagni, 2017). Brah's (1996) concept of diaspora space makes this relational aspect of homemaking clear. In her seminal work *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Brah emphasises the 'entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of staying put' (p. 181). 'The question of home,'

she asserts, 'is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion and exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances (p. 192).' Emphasising the role of those who have not moved in making or denying space for homemaking among newcomers underlines the importance of politics of identities, sense of belonging and social citizenship (Leung et al., forthcoming).

Finally, we highlight the role of the digital in our analysis. While physical, offline spaces and digital, online spaces exhibits their specificities and heterogeneities, they intersect in diverse, dynamic and contextualised ways (Jackson & Valentine, 2014). As early research in digital geographies noted, digital and physical spaces share symbiotic relationship (Kitchin, 1998, p. 403), converge (Imken, 1999) and/or co-create (Massey, 2005) each other. Introducing the concept of 'cON/FFlating situational spaces and places' Bork-Hüffer and Yeoh (2017) highlight the entangled, interdependent and often conflating online and offline spaces of encounters among migrants and the locals. Here, we examine the role of the digital space, intersecting with the physical space, in producing and contesting social differences, processes of arrival and homemaking. A plethora of (ethnographic) research has produced rich insights on the use of the digital among migrants in connecting with families and friends; finding information to move and stay, for housing and job opportunities; getting health care and other support; transferring money and phone credit etc. (Cabalquinto & Zhao, 2023; Godin & Donà, 2021; Udwan et al., 2020). Regarding homemaking, a series of recent research has examined digital practices among elderly migrants in transnational homemaking (e.g., Baldassar et al., 2020; Wilding et al., 2022). Similarly, scholars have paid attention to young migrant adults' digital practices and homemaking (e.g., Cabalquinto & Zhao, 2023; Patterson & Leurs, 2020).

This body of work, as a whole, shows the utility of the digital in supporting migrants' daily practices as well as building and maintaining social relations both locally (at the place of arrival, but also origin and other important places 'along the way') and transnationally. As importantly, research has also exposed the suppressive sides of the digital, ranging from the widespread use of digital technology in surveillance and policing — which are also elements of migration infrastructures (e.g., Nedelcu & Soysüren, 2022), the unevenness of the digital as in who has the access and ability to make use of these technologies (Candidatu et al., 2019), the exclusive and divisive processes in digital domains (Kaur, 2023; Leung & Waters, 2022) as well as the phenomenon on physical and mental health impact of excessive digital media use especially during the COVID pandemic (e.g., Mheidly et al. 2020; Ngien & Jiang 2022).

4 | STUDENTS' ARRIVAL IN THE NETHERLANDS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As a result of travel restrictions worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of international students decided not to attend their courses on site in the Netherlands. The minority, who made their way to the university nonetheless, were greeted by a drastically reduced welcome programme, which typically includes Introduction Days, city tours and so forth. During the lockdown, social contacts were discouraged. For those who, despite restrictions, still wanted to make new contacts, they had to rely on their initiatives as most official introduction events were cancelled or reduced to the minimum. The lockdown restricted the when and where students could meet each other. In addition to these, the little understood COVID-19 virus brought fears to many. Such fears were sadly often expressed in racialised manner and turned to discrimination and aggression widely toward Chinese-looking people (Chan & Montt Strabucchi, 2021; Haokip, 2021; Wang, Chen, et al., 2021) — but also toward others in China (Xu, Sun, et al., 2021). Confronted with such unwelcoming climate, our interlocuters had to take a more active role, arguably more so that in non-pandemic times, in building their 'own' arrival infrastructure, navigate both physically and socially in the new surrounding and make a new (transnational) home.

In the following, we present the arrival and homemaking experiences of our interlocuters. We organise their narratives 'socio-spatially' as they are played out on the infrastructural landscape. Specifically, we chart the students' agency and resilience in the spaces of learning, spaces of living (where they eat, drink, gather with friends and entertain) and spaces of encounter with the hostile 'others'. All of these infrastructural on/offline spaces are traversed by actors and institutions, in addition to the students themselves. While we present them in separate sections, they should be understood as intersecting in shaping the student newcomers' experiences in the Netherlands.

5 | ARRIVAL AT THE UNIVERSITY

During the lockdown, not only were universities and individual programmes not allowed to welcome their new students as usual, the way how teaching and learning took place had to be adjusted to rely almost completely on the digital. When we asked our interlocuters to reflect on their learning experiences in the course of the pandemic, we received quite diverse responses. Online classes were usually recalled as less motivating. Chang (early 20 s, male, bachelor student) shared his evolving feeling toward online classes:

> During the first one, 2 months of online classes, I, in fact, found it quite novel, quite interesting. For my class at 9 o'clock, I could get up at 8:50. I did not have to turn on the camera, did not have to wash my hair and face. I just sat in front of the computer. I thought it's quite convenient. And then slowly I got tired of it, and I felt that it was very virtual, facing a computer screen. Teachers and classmates were just one image after another, I thought it's so boring. I was in front of the screen every day. I started asking, what's the meaning of my study abroad?

Yin (early 20 s, female, master student), on the other hand, appreciated the expansion of digital resources and possibility for viewing recorded lectures. She considered the pandemic actually beneficial to her to 'land' as a newcomer:

> COVID was helpful for my first-year (master) study. It was also my first year studying abroad. So, the whole education system was also a very new experience, very different. Considering that, I am actually a little bit glad that COVID brought online education with it.

Students also took an active role to create digital communal learning spaces. Yang's (early 20 s, female, master student) recalled how he and his classmates navigated the alienating learning environment during the lockdown:

> Zoom learning clubs were very popular then. It could create the atmosphere and feeling of a study room. When someone is looking at you, you study hard. I remember that the library was also closed at that time. You could make an appointment to study [in the library] by yourself. But there were certain requirements. When the quota was full, you could not go. If you are alone, or if your study was difficult, or if you had just come [to the Netherlands] and were not very used to studying aboard, it would be very stressful. There were these online learning clubs. There were a lot at that time. There were very popular then.

Here, we see clearly students' agency in optimising the digital infrastructure to smoothen their arrival experiences. On the contrary, the physical campus played hardly a role as part of the arrival infrastructure during the lockdown. Anne (mid-20's, female, master student) could count the few times that she had visited the campus,

> I have only been to the teaching building twice, once at the start of the programme and the second time I went was to collect my diploma.

Most of our interlocuters felt a general detachment from university staff and other students in their study programmes. Some of them were ambivalent while others felt disconnected or even 'abandoned' by their universities.

6 | HOMEMAKING THROUGH AND AROUND FOOD

As compared to academic experiences, our interlocutors shared many more, and more multi-sensorial, stories regarding their journey of arrival in and around their residence and social life. These social experiences offer the basis for students' endeavours in creating a sense of home in a rather inaccessible new environment. While the Netherlands is infamous for it student housing shortage (Dimmendaal, 2022; Sotomayor et al., 2022) and racialised housing market (Fang & van Liempt, 2021), all our research participants attained student housing quite easily through arrival assistance from their respective university. Practically in all our interviews, students narrated joyful memories — contrasting the common portray of the pandemic as sad and restrictive — of the many small dinner parties and game gatherings, often unaffected by the formal restrictions. Chang recalled:

> There were many of us in our study programme that year, and everyone shared WeChat contact. Classmates who were more acquainted would call each other to gather at home, because one of us shared a flat with others and had a living room. Having hot-pot was especially convenient there… My friend lived nearby, every day I knocked on his door, looked for him to eat, chat and play billiards. I think foreign [meaning non-Chinese] students like to do disco dancing and having parties. The difference is that we didn't make so much noise when we ate hot-pot … As long as you didn't make too much noise, others couldn't hear you, and there would not be any reporting.

WeChat, or known as Weixin in China, is the most popular messaging, social media and mobile payment app. First released in 2011, WeChat is the leading app in China and estimated to have over 1.6 billion monthly active users (Turner, 2022). Not surprisingly, it was an essential element of Chinese students' arrival infrastructuring and homemaking practices. Digital practices faciliate face-to-face interactions. Hot-pot is a popular communal meal in China and many Asian countries. While variations abound, a hot-pot dinner is usually a gathering among friends and family, cooking raw ingredients in a pot of simmering pot of broth placed in the middle of the table. Like barbecue, a hot-pot gathering is as much a social event as it is a meal. As such, hot-pot, with its deep cultural meanings, serves as a crucial element in helping students create a sense of home and community in an unfamiliar environment to which they hardly had access during the lockdown. Feng (early 20 s, male, bachelor student) shared a story that illuminates the power of food practices in maintaining relationships and homemaking in transnational space (cf. Bailey, 2017):

> During the pandemic, I talked to my parents on the phone very often. And also often with my friends in China. They think of me sometimes, like when they had hot-pot, they would call me even though we did not talk for long.

Cooking and grocery shopping go hand in hand. During the lockdown, grocery shopping was one of the very few activities newcomer students regularly engaged in. Chang mentioned that 'grocery shopping gave me a sense of order in my life'. Like other

interviews, he enjoyed in particularly shopping in Asian grocery stores.

> Besides being at home, going to the Asian store made me fell most comfortable. At the store, there were mainly Chinese people, Asians. So when I went in, I felt relatively safe, at least I didn't have to worry about racial discrimination…It is like finally returning to my own turf… And seeing so many Chinese products could ease my homesickness. Every 2 weeks, I went to the Asian store to buy something, hot-pot soup base, Chinese condiments and other special Chinese food.

Chang's reflection underlines the importance of 'stability' among newcomers, recalling Meeus et al.'s (2019) conceptualisation of the arrival infrastructure. Two more points worth highlighting in the above quote. The first point concerns racism, stigmatisation and discrimination against Chinese-looking people during the COVID-19 pandemic (Al Jazeera, 2020; Wang, Chen, et al., 2021), on which we will elaborate in a latter section. The second point surrounds the role of Chinese/Asian ethnic-cultural commercial spaces as key elements of arrival infrastructure and homemaking processes among Chinese newcomers. Due to the lockdown, this ethnic(ised) infrastructure was much reduced to the grocery stores. In ordinary (non-pandemic) times, Chinese/Asian students and the diaspora more broadly, including tourists, are important clients of other Chinese/Asian businesses such as restaurants, karaoke bars, barber shops and hair salons etc. (Kang, 2009; Leung, 2009). As such, the homemaking processes, livelihoods and lifestyles of different migrant groups — ranging from students to operators (owners and workers) of the Chinese/Asian businesses who often have migration background — intersect and constitute each other. In the following section, we will zoom into the emergent digital business that arose to suit the need for many who felt isolated during the pandemic times.

7 | DIGITAL SOCIAL LIFE

As already shown earlier, the digital played a key role in the arrival and homemaking practices among our interlocuters. Among the common usages of the digital for learning, shopping and finding health-related information, we focus here on students' use of the digital for socialising, which constitutes a significant part of homemaking. Even though students socialised also in-person even during the time when strict social distance restrictions were imposed, digital gaming and entertainments were also often mentioned in our interviews. Feng (early 20 s, male, bachelor student) recalled:

> I used Weibo [a Chinese microblogging website] every day, about 4 or 5 h [I think it] a day. My mobile phone was always in my hand. But I basically do not use it now. I check it only occasionally. Because I think Weibo consumes too much energy, after reading it, you will only feel tired, and you don't get anything out it. In those times, I posted bullet-screen comments, but now I don't post them at all. And I checked Bilibili [a Chinese video-sharing platform] that focuses on anima, comics and games contents] every day. When I had nothing else to do, I watched 2 or 3 h a day, I would watch some TV series continuously.

As Feng mentioned, online chats with friends and family constituted an important part of community care practised both locally and transnationally. Catching on this need for (new) friendship and care, some businesses have emerged. Chang shared with us his usage of Soul, an app launched during the pandemic in 2020 that uses artificial intelligence algorithms to match users and find their 'ideal soulmates'.

> I made Soul calls everyday. Just hanging out, chatting. Because people studying abroad were stuck at home, online socialising was very common. I called every day for an hour. If I found a good match, then I just made one call. If not, I would call 8 times, 10 times. You can do a personality test, and choose the functions to have the app do a voice match or text match. It will help you match, with a person in the same sex or opposite sex… The first 3 min is anonymous. The other person doesn't know who you are, you don't know who s/he is. After 3 min you can choose to be reveal your identity. If one does not disclose his or her identity, the call hangs up automatically after the first 3 min.

Liang (early 20 s, male, bachelor student) shared similar digital practices:

> I have also tried paid online chat service. You can order that on Taobao [the biggest Chinese online shopping platform]. In this business, they can talk to you about anything, other than pornographic content, you can decide what to talk about… There are different quality levels of these chat companions… The most expensive may cost 300, 400 RMB (38–50 Euro) for half an hour. The cheapest might cost 30 (3.8 Euro). In the past 2 years, I probably spent more than 10,000 RMB (1200 Euro) on chatting. A lot of the chat companions told me that many of their clients were international students, because they were stuck, had nothing to do and were bored at home, so they looked for a companion to chat with.

While digital gaming expanded globally and among diverse consumer populations during the pandemic (Macker, 2021), their role in distracting and entertaining newcomers with fewer possibilities of socialisation, like our interlocuters, deserves particular attention. Feng and Liang told us that they had much reduced or stopped their

digital consumption as life returned to 'normal' after the lockdown, the booming business as a whole seems to be going strong, however (Read, 2022). The impact can be worrisome. A report by the (World Health Organisation, 2020), for instance, warned about the potential health impact of excessive screen use and gaming. On the other hand, there have also been some innovative gamification attempts to use digital technology, e-learning tools, virtual worlds support international students to adjust and embed into their new learning and social environment (Zhang et al., 2017), as our interlocuters also alluded to earlier.

8 | MAKING HOME IN (SPITE OF) AN UNSAFE, HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

> *Wendy: Before I had never seen myself as a victim. But after Corona, I have to say, yeah, I'm also a victim now.... I feel a bit hopeless. Before this university actually, I had a lot of dreams. I wanted to achieve a lot of things in a new country, on a new continent. But now, I kind of lost my ability to dream anymore, 'cos I feel like I'm not belonging here, or I can never adapt to this society only because of my skin colour.*
>
> Transcript from short film *COVID doesn't discriminate* (Shaker Productions, 2021)

Racialisation and discrimination was commonly felt among our interlocuters. Wendy (mid 20 s, female, master student), the protagonist in a short film that was produced based on the findings of our first research, expressed her sense of being denied and hopeless. Gaby (early 20 s, female, bachelor student) also shared with us her bad memories:

> When I went to groceries with a face mask those days [the first wave of the pandemic in March and April 2020], many children and teenagers ran away once they saw me. When I was on the street, people often yelled 'Corona' and 'China' at me. This was quite normal and I really got used to it...

Wendy's and Gaby's recollections underline the extremely challenging arrival that many Chinese newcomers underwent during the early phase of the pandemic. In the arrival infrastructure literature, the focus is generally put on structures and practices that facilitate the arrival of newcomers. Here, we would like to emphasise the agency of the migrants in making home, creating the sense of safety in an unwelcoming environment. Racialised acts described by our interlocutors above brought a high level of insecurity to them. They reacted in an array of manner, infrastructur*ing* their own arrival. Most of them avoided unsafe spaces — both in the sense of public health and racism, and took detour to reach their destinations. Many shopped only in Asian grocery shops where they find a feeling of home, stability and safety. Some became more actively guarded. Liang (early 20 s, male, bachelor student) shared his rather extreme experiences:

> When the pandemic first started, my classmates and I encountered racial discrimination every day when we went out on the street... That was in March, April 2020. I was scolded for wearing a mask, scolded for not wearing a mask. I heard 'ching chong', 'fuck you', 'corona China' at every turn. ...

He went on to describe the details of multiple incidents of racialised assaults. He then shared with us, highly emotionally, his self-defence practice:

> At that time, my friend and I were exercising at home every day. We learned to fight. And I went out to the streets every day with a knife in my pocket... It doesn't matter if people curse. But I saw a lot of news at that time, about Asians being beaten. Did you know that at that time, in the United States and Britain, many Asians were beaten on the street for no reason? ... Later on, I did not bring anything sharp, but brass knuckles to protect myself.

As in many other places, assaults against Chinese-looking people during the pandemic attracted attention to processes of racialisation that had long existed. The resurface and exacerbation of systemic racism against Asians fuelled heated debates and activism in many parts of the world. Acts of resilience and solidarity took the form of demonstrations, also in Amsterdam, and hashtag campaigns such as #IAmNotAVirus and #StopAsianHate. Wendy, whose quote opens this section, was one of those who became active in countering anti-Asian racism in during that period. Some of these have fed back to the arrival and welcome infrastructure at Dutch universities. In addition to a number of panel discussions for raising awareness during the pandemic, longer-term plans to improve preparedness among students and study advisors were made (Bos, 2022). Beyond the university spaces, civil organising has gained media coverage, depth and reach in their networks. The Pan Asian Collective, an action project of Humanity in Action, for instance, was formed during the pandemic and has formalised afterwards and continued to create representation and visibility for Asians in the Netherlands. These developments help illustrate the active role people, migrants and their allies, play in shaping the already existing arrival infrastructure, which in turn should be seen as dynamic and processual.

9 | CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Linking the conceptual debates surrounding arrival infrastructure, homemaking and conflating on/offline spaces, we have shown in this paper how Chinese students were active in infrastructuring their arrival in the Netherlands during the COVID-19 pandemic times.

Though we have repeatedly heard about the difficulties our interlocuters had to deal with, we are mostly impressed by their agency and resilience. These narratives contrast the 'poor students' tales that were reported worldwide. Underlining students' resilience does not mean, absolutely not, belittling the hardship and the long-term impact. Our more optimistic impressions were collected especially, but not only, in our follow-up project when our research participants could look back to the surreal time of recurrent lockdowns with some distance, had started to experience their new surrounding and make home in the Netherlands as 'things being back to normal'.

Through the many life stories of our research participants, we have learned how students have experienced, dealt with and even enjoyed the pandemic times very differently. Each person went through the exceptional period with ups and downs, navigating or being stuck in different places, making new encounters in the course of time. While such diversities and dynamics are to be expected, extant representations of international students during the pandemic tend to be homogenising. We hope that our paper has contributed to bring layers to the discussion. In particular, we have put the spotlight on the agency of the students in building their new home, observed through the conceptual lenses of arrival infrastructure and homemaking. Arriving in a new place when the usual arrival infrastructure ceased to work, students had to be even more active than in usual circumstances in creating their sense of arrival and belonging. We have learned that processes of arrival and homemaking are very much influenced by other actors and institutions that are positioned in different places and across scales. Our findings have shown the importance of communal care, reflected by how phone calls to home and feeling the care from home afar were key ingredients for the homemaking process for newcomer students in the Netherlands. Our discussion on the power of food practices underline the multisensorial characteristics of arrival and homemaking processes among newcomers.

While we place the newcomers in the centre of our analysis in this paper, we have also demonstrated the multiple actors and institutions active in the arrival infrastructure concerning our interlocutors. These actors and institutions are embedded in the state, commercial and civil domains across space and scales — ranging from the immigration regime, universities, Asian grocery stores, digital game providers to racist offenders. They shape, in interactive and dynamic ways, the life experiences of the international students as newcomers and transnational beings.

Many of our interlocuters, like most people from all walks of life, were relieved that COVID was 'over'. They commonly reported that things have returned to 'normal'; they were going out to explore the city and relying less or hardly at all on the digital for entertainment. Yet, traces of the 'temporary' arrival infrastructures and homemaking practices that we have mapped out and their impact, in particular, linger on. Some of the traces are (quite) material — money (though digital) was moved, things were bought and sold. The role of the digital in university education has become much more part of the standard worldwide. There are also digital traces, for instance, of the short-lived but, at least to some, powerful activism events and debates, as well as relational traces of friendship, solidarity and scepticism (e.g., vis-à-vis the racializing 'others'). The stories and (collective) memories, some of which we presented here, have also become parts of the broader and longer-term arrival infrastructures and homemaking resources for future generations of newcomers. Such 'heritage' linger on even after our interlocuters have moved on spatially and/or biographically as they are longer newcomers, students or migrants. This lingering is important socio-politically. While racialised discrimination against Chinese students might seem to have subsided, memories of 'COVID racism' should linger to alert us for staying observant and vigilant. If nothing else, the narratives shared by our research partners should be carried around, like our interlocuter Liang's (early 20 s, male, bachelor student) brass knuckle, in our pockets so that we are (more) prepared for the moments when agency and resilience are particularly called for in the next 'crisis'.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflict of interests declared.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

We confirm that our paper does not contain any shared data. Our study includes original data, we confirm that we have full access to all the data in the study, and takes responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

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