



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

The pedagogy of studying abroad: a case study of Chinese students in the Netherlands

Jiang, L.; Kosar Altinyelken, H.

DOI

[10.1080/21568235.2020.1718517](https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2020.1718517)

Publication date

2020

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

European Journal of Higher Education

License

CC BY-NC-ND

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Jiang, L., & Kosar Altinyelken, H. (2020). The pedagogy of studying abroad: a case study of Chinese students in the Netherlands. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 10(2), 202-216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2020.1718517>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

The pedagogy of studying abroad: a case study of Chinese students in the Netherlands

Lina Jiang  and Hülya Kosar Altinyelken 

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

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore Chinese students' experiences in the Dutch higher education system with a focus on classroom pedagogy. Based on interviews with 28 Chinese students from eight higher education institutions, it analyses Chinese students' understanding and reflections of teaching and learning practices, and the challenges they encounter. The findings indicate that shifting from China's exam-oriented system and highly teacher-centred education to a more interactive and student-centred pedagogy in the Netherlands has been challenging for the students. The study identified the following aspects as being the most pertinent: comprehension in English, cultural differences, classroom participation, group learning, examination and assessment, critical thinking and creativity, and roles of lecturers. The findings underscore the need for lecturers to provide more support and guidance to Chinese students, and more consideration of the diversity in international classrooms in terms of previous pedagogical experiences, and cultural and linguistic differences.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 April 2019
Accepted 16 January 2020

KEYWORDS

Internationalisation of higher education; Chinese students; the Netherlands; pedagogy

Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed an increased focus on international cooperation and exchange in higher education (HE), as well as an increasing number of internationally mobile students (Rumbley, Altbach, and Reisberg 2012). In 2016, around five million students were studying in HE outside of their countries of origin worldwide (OECD 2018) and at least 1.6 million in Europe (EC 2018). Until the 1980s, the underlying reasons for recruitment of foreign students were manifold, including social, political, cultural, and academic motivations, whereas nowadays economic issues are playing an increasingly important role (Bartell 2003; de Wit et al. 2015). Currently, countries such as China, India, South Korea, Malaysia and Vietnam send most of their internationally mobile students to other countries (Barnett et al. 2016). Hence, Asia is perceived as a large market whose students have potentially high purchasing power (EC 2005). The region has been targeted by some European countries such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Germany.

CONTACT Lina Jiang  ljiang@uva.nl  Graduate School of Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 127, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Some perceive the expansion of western HE as an extension of a colonial legacy (Bolsmann and Miller 2008), while others criticise it for failing to adapt to the needs of international students (Heffernan et al. 2010). However, students from developing countries tend to believe that western HE systems are more advanced in comparison to those in their home countries (Altbach 2004).

China has the largest number of international students enrolled around the world. In 2017, around 608,400 Chinese students studied abroad (MOE 2018). Across the European Union, China was the largest country of origin for tertiary students from abroad in 2016, accounting for 10.5% of the total. Chinese students were the largest international student group in Germany, Ireland, Italy, Sweden, and the second largest in France, the Netherlands and Finland (EC 2018). While the existing academic literature has examined the experiences of Chinese students in English-speaking countries (Gu and Schweisfurth 2006; Grimshaw 2007; Ha and Li 2014), Chinese students coming to study in non-English-speaking European countries have not been given much attention. Currently, there is not much literature particularly about their pedagogical experiences in continental Europe. This study, however, presents an in-depth exploration of the pedagogical challenges of Chinese students, by documenting 28 students' experiences from eight Dutch higher education institutions (HEIs).

The following research questions guide the analysis in this article:

How do Chinese students experience classroom pedagogy in the Dutch higher education system and what challenges do they encounter?

This study is timely, since Dutch HEIs have been making considerable efforts to ensure that internationalisation continues to enhance the quality of education (VSNU and VH 2018). Hence, the study has wider implications for improving educational quality in HE in the Netherlands and in comparable contexts in Europe.

The article is structured as follows: First, a review of studies on the internationalisation of HE in the Netherlands is presented. Then the pedagogical approaches in international classrooms are discussed, followed by consideration of pedagogical practices in European and Dutch HE, impact of cultural differences on teaching and learning, as well as a review of literature regarding Chinese students' pedagogical experiences in western HE. This is followed by a description of the methodology of the study. The findings are presented next, focusing on Chinese students' views, reflections and experiences in Dutch HE. Finally, the article concludes by discussing the major findings and suggestions for future research.

Internationalisation of higher education: the Netherlands

In Europe, internationalisation as a strategic process began with ERASMUS, a programme for cooperation within European HE, in the late 1980s. This has been further reinforced since 1999 by the Bologna Process (de Wit et al. 2015). The Bologna Process has underscored the strategic role of HE in the promotion of economic competitiveness and the need to make European HE more attractive to students from other continents (Haskel 2008).

In accord with the Bologna Process, the Netherlands has been encouraging institutions to offer courses in English in order to attract foreign students and to foster internationalisation (EC 2005). A number of ministries have been involved in the promotion of Dutch HE abroad. For instance, the Netherlands Organisation for International Co-operation in Higher Education (NUFFIC) is responsible for 'internationalisation of higher education,

international recognition and certification and the marketing of Dutch higher education' (EC 2005, 39). Foreign offices, the Netherlands Education Support Offices (NESO), have been set up in 10 countries that are considered as 'strategically important for Dutch higher education' (NUFFIC 2018). The main rationale underlying the current national policies for the internationalisation of Dutch HE is economic. Some argue that the Netherlands approaches this issue as a 'brain gain': for instance, the recruitment of students and staff in science and technology can help to improve the country's relatively low research capacity in this area (Luijten-Lub, van der Wende, and Huisman 2005). The action plan, *Make it in the Netherlands*, calls on talented international students to start their careers in the Netherlands, and suggests that 'developing stable, long-term relationships with international students will strengthen the Netherlands' knowledge economy' (OCW 2013, 1). Like other European countries, such as Germany, France and Finland (Li 2017), the Netherlands has pursued a policy of granting international university graduates residence permits for job seeking. To attract Chinese students, in particular, NUFFIC also organises activities in China, such as information events on scholarships and studying in the Netherlands (Hong et al. 2017).

Due to all these national policies and efforts, in the academic year 2017–2018, at least 122,000 students with 162 different nationalities were enrolled in the Dutch HEIs. The total number of international degree students from countries with NESO offices doubled, while new enrolments almost tripled over the past 10 years. China has remained the second largest country of origin since 2006 (NUFFIC 2017).

Theoretical underpinnings

The basic definition of pedagogy concerns the method and practice of teaching. However, Alexander (2001) defines pedagogy as both the act of teaching and the discourse in which the act of teaching is embedded. 'Pedagogy, then, encompasses both the act of teaching and its contingent theories and debates – about, for example, the character of culture and society, the purposes of education, the nature of childhood and learning and the structure of knowledge' (513). Based on Alexander's theory, the pedagogy in this study will then be discussed along with its two central acts – teaching and learning.

Pedagogical approaches in international classrooms

There is a wide range of literature concerning pedagogy in the internationalisation of HE. Lavia (2007) believes that pedagogy carries political and strategic intent, which links history with culture, power and politics. As he suggests, in the developing world, pedagogies cannot be prescribed, and they occur specifically within each case. An engaged pedagogy has been recommended in the HE system (Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2009), with an emphasis on the recognition of the existence and value of multiple realities and knowledges – such pedagogy involves genuine dialogue, one 'that must contest the hegemonic discourse of western "best practice"' (43). In the international multicultural study environment, culture is central to student learning and a culturally responsive pedagogy not only identifies the importance of academic achievement but also maintains cultural identity and heritage. Hence Han et al. (2014) point out the importance of building up supportive relationships between educators and students. McLaren (1999) has also

stressed the importance of understanding students' culture and developing a student-centred educational process while, at the same time, recognising teachers' crucial role in helping students become critical thinkers and activists.

Pedagogical practices in European and Dutch higher education

In European HEIs, considerable progress has been made over the past few decades in assuring high quality education, which has contributed to the shift towards student-centred learning and teaching (ENQA et al. 2015). One of the key drivers is to ensure that Europe will be globally competitive, as student-centred pedagogy (SCP) is viewed as advanced in improvement of students' learning (ENQA et al. 2015). The global economy puts a high value on employees who are able to think creatively and adapt flexibly to work demands, identify and solve problems as well as cooperate with colleagues. The student-centred approach has been viewed as superior in stimulating the development of such competences, hence in preparing children and youth for the world of work (Windschitl 2002; Altinyelken 2011). Some highly noted student-centred instructional practices in European HE include active learning, collaborative learning, experiential learning, as well as emphasis on critical and analytical learning (Klemencic 2019). Other important elements are discussed such as multifaceted student-centred assessment, learning and teaching support, and increased autonomy of the students (2, 8).

This paradigm shift to SCP has had important implications for the educational system in the Netherlands. Educational experts reached consensus on important teaching competencies including adopting more student-focused approaches to teaching, facilitating learning processes and having a positive and respectful attitude towards students (Tigelaar et al. 2004). NUFFIC (2013) described the Dutch teaching style as 'interactive and student-centred', and it focuses on teamwork and encourages students to work in groups, to interact, to develop and express their own opinions in classrooms. In a survey of international students who graduated from HEIs in the Netherlands conducted by NUFFIC (2012), 94% out of 3296 students from 21 countries were satisfied with their learning experiences. The aspects of the Dutch educational system that they considered most valuable were the use of English, the teacher-student relationship and competence-based learning.

Impact of cultural differences on teaching and learning

Teaching and learning approaches in international education could be analysed and understood through the lens of Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory. Hofstede identified four major dimensions that characterise different cultures: power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede 1986). Power distance refers to the extent to which the less powerful people in a society accept inequality in power. Individualism or collectivism represents how much individuals are attached to and integrated into groups. Masculine culture defines distinct gender roles in societies, whereas in feminine societies gender roles overlap. Uncertainty avoidance defines the extent to which people are made nervous by unstructured, unclear, unpredictable or uncertain situations. As further elaborated in Rienties and Tempelaar's study (2013), student-centred education may be more appropriate for countries with low power distance and weak uncertainty avoidance, such as the Netherlands, Nordic European and Anglo-

Saxon countries. However, students from cultures with high power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance are more used to teacher-centred approaches, as found in Eastern European, Latin and Confucian Asian countries (China, Vietnam, Taiwan). Their study indicates that, because of their different cultural backgrounds, students from Southern Asia (Indonesia, Iran, India and Bangladesh) and, in particular, Confucian Asia have to overcome more substantial transitional barriers than those from other European countries, Latin America and the Middle East while studying in the Netherlands.

Chinese students' pedagogical experiences in western higher education

Being influenced by China's exam-oriented and highly teacher-centred education, Chinese students have experienced a range of problems when studying at western HEIs. Ha and Li (2014) discussed the issue of Chinese students in Australian classrooms being stereotyped as passive learners who are reluctant to speak up. Their research illustrated that remaining silent was more about a choice and a right for students, which should not be viewed as something negative. Another study on Chinese students in Canadian HE (Zhou, Knoke, and Sakamoto 2005) also found that the language barrier was one of the obvious reasons for Chinese students' lack of active participation or good communication. In Durkin's (2008) study, Chinese and other Asian master's students at British universities tried to adapt to the western norms of critical thinking and argumentation. The majority of them eventually chose a 'middle way' that combines their own cultural approach to critical thinking with that of the western style. In their point of view, the western style of critique and debates appears to be too insensitive and unnecessarily offensive. Hence, they opted to reject this 'confrontational battlefield approach' (49).

In the non-English speaking European context such as Germany, Chinese students have reported greater challenges in academic life as German is the language of instruction in some programmes (Li 2017). In Finland, HEIs value student independence and critical thinking, while the Chinese pedagogy traditionally focuses on lectures. Hence the lack of training in 'critical thinking' caused difficulty for Chinese students when participating in classroom discussions (Li and Pitkanen 2018). In the Netherlands, an online survey of 647 Chinese students studying in HEIs indicates that about 75% of the respondents appreciated the equal status between students and professors. They also appreciated the requirement to work together in groups, and were positive that Dutch HE puts more emphasis on the practical value of knowledge (Hong et al. 2017). However, little has been discussed about what challenges or barriers have been encountered by Chinese students during their study. Biemans and Van Mil (2008) demonstrated that the way students were used to learning in China did not fit the demands of the Dutch educational context. Many Chinese students adhered to their 'Chinese learning style'. For instance, they relied heavily on memorisation and exhibited more characteristics of reproduction-directed learning: focusing more on learning facts instead of deep processing. These aspects made it difficult for them to study successfully in the Dutch learning environment.

Methodology

This study is based on a fieldwork carried out 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 university. Verbal permission was also obtained from all the participants. Confidentiality and anonymity have been maintained strictly. All names used in the findings are pseudonyms.

At the beginning of the fieldwork, the first author got in touch with a student on Douban, a Chinese social networking website. Then she was introduced to one student group on WeChat, a widely used mobile phone application in China, from which she reached some participants by snowball sampling (Teddlie and Yu 2007). As more contacts were set up, she was able to access more WeChat groups, through which more students were reached. In order to explore Chinese students' experiences and challenges in a comprehensive manner, the researchers included students from different levels of study: bachelor's and master's students, and from different disciplines. Students from economics and business, humanities and social sciences account for the majority. In one earlier study (Long et al. 2009) about 168 Chinese students' cross-cultural adaptation in the Netherlands, it was reported that girls performed better academically than boys. In order to understand whether gender affects the learning experiences, the last four participants were contacted purposefully (Teddlie and Yu 2007), so that the numbers of male and female students were both 14. (See Table 1 below for more information on the participants.)

Twenty-four face-to-face and four Skype individual interviews were conducted by the first author in Chinese. As the student participants are native speakers of Chinese, this ensured ease of communication and the accuracy of the data. The interviews were semi-structured so that the participants had more freedom to share their experiences. Interviews lasted between 40 and 80 minutes, and focused on students' views on Dutch HE and their reflections on classroom pedagogy. All interviews were transcribed verbatim in Chinese.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to identify, analyse and report themes within the collected data. All interviews were fully transcribed and coded using the ATLAS.ti software programme. Some initial codes were created and developed based on the theoretical review (Ha and Li 2014; Zhou, Knoke, and Sakamoto 2005; Durkin 2008; Li 2017; Grimshaw 2007; Klemencic 2019), and others were included during analysis. The final list was adapted to better address and incorporate emerging themes, including 'comprehension in English', 'cultural differences', 'classroom participation', 'group learning', 'examination and assessment', 'critical thinking and creativity', and 'roles of lecturers'. The coded data were analysed to establish the main findings. Wherever necessary, quotations that illustrated the key findings were extracted and translated into English.

Results

The Chinese students reflected on their education in Dutch HEIs, and confirmed that the pedagogical approach they experienced was very different from that in

Table 1. Background information on participants.

	Gender	Age	Study level	Faculty enrolled with
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
Total				28

their home country. The following sections present the challenges that they encountered while adjusting themselves to the more interactive and student-centred Dutch pedagogy.

Language comprehension in English

All the participants are studying/have studied in English-speaking programmes. However, students' levels of English language competence vary. Language comprehension became a major challenge for some students, as they commented that China's exam-oriented teacher-centred education limited their opportunity to practice speaking English, not to mention the ability to argue or debate. Their writing skills were perceived as relatively poor in comparison to those of other students, as they had learned to write essays following the standards set for the examinations.

The majority of lecturers in Dutch HEIs are not native speakers of English, and Dutch students often speak Dutch among themselves. Even though it is an environment where people communicate mostly in English, English is a second language for many. The lack of fluency in English presented a challenge not only to the students, but to the lecturers as well:

The Dutch are good at English, but then not as good as I expected. I got confused sometimes in class. Some lecturers and tutors have very strong accents and I couldn't understand them. (Bruce: Male/21/BA/SBS)

The difficulty in understanding English / different accents was reported by almost all the respondents, but more frequently by male students. This challenge was quite intense for them, especially during the first few months.

Cultural differences

In the unique context of Dutch HE, lack of knowledge about the Dutch culture or social context represented another challenge for Chinese students. This was particularly evident among students of social sciences, as well as those studying business when there were case studies related to western/Dutch society. For many students, the meaning of 'culture' or phenomena related to differences in cultural values and norms were difficult to define or to recognise. Some ascribed their miscommunication with other nationalities partially to cultural differences, since different cultural backgrounds engendered different ways of thinking and expressing:

I believe my pronunciation was really good and accurate, but they [non-Chinese students] couldn't understand me. Later on, I realised there was a great difference between our ways of thinking. Though they could recognise the English words when I spoke, they still didn't understand. (Keith: Male/24/BA/E&B)

The Dutch direct way of communication, regarded by many students as one of the characteristics of their Dutch classmates, also constituted an important challenge:

The Dutch are too direct. We were asked to write an essay as a group. One Dutch classmate said, 'Your part is not good. You should rewrite it.' It was very hard for me. Even though I was not the best student my whole life, this was the first time I felt so bad about my studying. I really felt embarrassed and frustrated. (Isabel: Female/21/MA/E&B)

Classroom participation

In Dutch classrooms, students could interrupt lecturers randomly and raise questions or express their opinions freely. However, most Chinese students remained silent during the discussions and did not raise questions or respond to them actively. Many regarded being silent as a way of showing respect to teachers in Chinese classrooms, while some chose not to question because they respected the class time that they shared with others. Kyle mentioned that sometimes the questions raised by other students appeared to be meaningless:

I have a classmate who likes to ask questions very much but always asks too simple questions. We really think so. These questions are common sense to us. Some are even stupid. We spend too much time talking about these, and then our lecturer can't finish all the content. I think our time has been wasted. (Kyle: Male/23/BA/E&B)

However, when participation is highly encouraged and expected, silence could be regarded as abnormal. Justine felt uncomfortable and even discriminated against when hearing this:

Even other students know that we don't speak up much or interact in class. One European student once called my two Chinese girl classmates 'Mickey Mouse' and made jokes about them, saying 'Mickey Mouse doesn't speak in class'. This is really embarrassing. (Justine: Female/23/BA/E&B)

This challenge was discussed by almost all students, but the concern was highlighted more frequently by master's students in economics and business, who were taking classes with 200 fellow students. The large class size severely limited their chances of actively participating even though they intended to do so. Instead, many students preferred to discuss among themselves or converse with lecturers privately after class or through email. For them, remaining silent did not equate to being reluctant to study or being passive learners. On the contrary, they saw themselves as active learners, and remaining silent was their pedagogical approach to comprehend the knowledge:

I don't like to rush with my questions. I always try to comprehend the knowledge by myself first. After that, I can still question and discuss, but in a more effective way. If I joined the discussion without a clear understanding, it would be a waste of time, and I wouldn't learn much. So this way I actually learn better. (Nancy: Female/29/MA/SBS)

Group learning

Group learning was not unique to western education, as it was also used in Chinese education. Many students regarded working in groups as beneficial to their learning and a useful method to cultivate teamwork skills. However, a few mentioned that on many occasions back in China, those who were better academically did most of the work. Due to their lack of experience, cooperating more intensively with international peers in the new learning environment engendered discomfort or even depression for some:

I didn't have enough experience or preparation. I tried very hard to work with my group members. They asked me why I couldn't do this or that. I felt really hurt. My [Chinese] friend had the same problem. She asked her classmate, 'Which part should I cover?' Then the response she got was 'but what can you do?' ... So the first month I was really depressed. (Frank: Male/23/MA/E&B)

Some commented that to interact effectively with group members, it was necessary for them to take the initiative, read sufficient articles and adopt an active approach in group discussions. As such, these would make a worthwhile contribution to their personal development. Nevertheless, a few students still had great difficulty communicating with their peers:

I read an article about stereotypes of Chinese students. One of them is that Chinese don't like group work. Then I thought, that's me! I just don't know why we had so much trouble. We couldn't give feedback, or explain things clearly to each other. Then we just couldn't proceed. (Godwin: Male/23/MA/SBS)

This challenge was reported mostly by master's students, and was more evident among students of humanities and social sciences, especially when students shared different views on certain subjects. Students' different ways of expressing their opinions also interfered with group learning:

We [Chinese students] always try to find a balance if we have different opinions. But they, especially Dutch students, always think they are right and argue aggressively. I don't want to do that – argue like fighting. But then my opinion will be buried, if I don't have solid evidence. So group work is always a nightmare. Either I give up or we just argue endlessly. (Jacob: Male/22/BA/Humanities)

Examinations and assessment

Some bachelor's students believed that certain examinations in Dutch HEIs were similar to Chinese ones, which strictly required students to master the knowledge. To achieve good performance on such exams, students maintained the same learning style as they used to. Nevertheless, for many master's students, the Dutch exam requirements and assessment standards were different and more challenging. In China, teachers always pointed out important content that was most likely to be tested, and students prepared for exams mostly through memorisation and repetition. In comparison, in the Dutch context, students' own understanding of the content was required, as well as practical application of the knowledge:

Memorisation and cramming don't work here. I think an integration of everything you've learned in this course is needed. Before the first exams, I really didn't know how to prepare, or what would be tested. After the exams, I didn't know whether I did well or not. I never had this feeling before. (Felicity: Female/23/MA/E&B)

Exams with open-ended questions and differences in assessment criteria presented a challenge for students, which caused anxiety and uncertainty among them. They claimed that they needed more time to get used to the Dutch assessment system, especially for one-year master's students.

Critical thinking and creativity

Many confirmed that classroom pedagogy and discipline in Chinese education had a negative influence on creativity, and had limited their critical thinking and discouraged their curiosity. As Chinese education encourages listening attentively and memorising knowledge, and students are accustomed to following teachers without questioning or interaction, gradually not only their voices, but their curiosity had been silenced as well. Olivia recalled her experience from primary school to university:

I was very active and curious in primary school. Then in junior high I hardly asked questions. Then in senior high classes, the only thing I did was take notes. I believe we were born with the nature of being curious, both Chinese and other children. But Chinese children become more and more silent. Years and years of education has put a limit on our thinking. (Olivia: Female/25/MA/E&B)

Keith (Male/24/BA/E&B) echoed such a view by stating that his mind was so dependent on others that he could not think on his own, not to mention think critically. He recalled being discouraged from questioning often by his mother, whom he held accountable for his lack of creative thinking.

Chinese students do not only absorb information passively from teachers; they receive numerous instructions from family members as well. Consequently, they become increasingly dependent even in decision making, which jeopardises their ability to think independently. Worse still, such an education has been so detrimental to students' minds that many have great difficulty even in identifying their own interests:

Many students choose a field of study because their parents ask them to, or because people around them suggest so. Then they study so hard to get into the university. But once they get in, they are completely lost. There is no direction or goal for them anymore, and they realise what they've been fighting for is not something they really like. (Alan: Male/18/BA/Humanities)

In contrast, the education in Dutch HEIs was perceived as better in developing students' creativity and cultivating critical and independent thinking. Laura summarised the characteristics of the two educational systems by quoting a Chinese proverb:

'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.' Needless to say, the Dutch system does better. The Chinese education does not cultivate your way of thinking. It only gives you 'a fish'. However, the Dutch education cares more about how you 'catch the fish'. It has helped me develop my abilities to analyse and solve problems, as well as to think independently. (Laura: Female/33/MA/SBS)

Nevertheless, not all students agreed with such comments. Some claimed that they developed such skills on their own, through self-awareness and years of influence from the learning environment, while a number of them were not certain about acquiring such skills, especially when learning from lecturers with 'poor' teaching style:

I think both in China and the Netherlands, there are good lecturers and poor ones. The good ones can encourage you to think critically. The poor ones just read everything on slides. You won't learn anything from them. I don't agree that lecturers here are all better than those in China. (Nelson: Male/26/MA/Science)

Notably, nearly all the students reported these difficulties in thinking critically, creatively or independently. Only Grace (Female/25/MA/SBS), one out of twenty-eight students, claimed that she learned to think critically because her parents taught her to analyse, compare and evaluate before making decisions.

The role of lecturers

Some students pointed out that teachers in China have a tendency to provide more guidance and support, while lecturers in the Netherlands prefer to give students more freedom and room for independent thinking. As there is a dramatic shift in the role of

teachers in the new educational context, Chinese students had to adjust from being authority-dependent to individual learning. Such a process might be totally unexpected and sometimes confusing for the newcomers:

I used to think education overseas is really good ... but students are just learning all by themselves. To make it sound nicer, it is called the heuristic mode of teaching. However, the truth is that lecturers don't have to teach, and you just learn by yourself. (Bella: Female/22/MA/E&B)

Such comments indicate that Chinese students favour a more supportive relationship with lecturers and expect more commitment from them. This issue was more evident among male master's students than all the others, especially research master's in social sciences and humanities. Godwin even suffered from the relationship with his supervisor:

Even though it is not the supervisor's responsibility to tell students what they should do, I still wished my supervisor had made his requirements and expectations more specific. We never argued, but we were never on the same page. For two years I was pretty much on my own. Sometimes I felt my own resistance: not willing to look at my papers or email him. I was suffering a lot from it. (Godwin: Male/23/MA/SBS)

Discussion and conclusion

This study aims to contribute to the literature on the internationalisation of HE by providing an in-depth analysis of Chinese students' pedagogical experiences in Dutch HE. It has explored Chinese students' reflections on classroom pedagogy and identified the challenges that they encountered.

Interestingly, in the context of Dutch HE offering English-speaking programmes, some of our findings seem consistent with those in Nordic European and Anglo-Saxon countries. For instance, as indicated in the Finish case (Li and Pitkanen 2018), Chinese students were not active in classroom participation. Echoing Durkin's study (2008) in U.K., almost all the participants reported difficulties in critical thinking and efforts to adapt. A lack of linguistic proficiency or cultural understanding posed a challenge, which was confirmed by another study in Canada as well (Zhou, Knoke, and Sakamoto 2005). In that sense, our findings are not surprising because these contexts are comparable, with a high-power-distance and strong-uncertainty-avoidance culture, while the Chinese students come from a society characterised by low power distance and weak uncertainty avoidance. They faced significant adaptation issues when shifting from teacher-centred to student-centred pedagogy, and from believing in teachers' authority to being critical and being able to contradict and criticise teachers.

However, our study also emphasises the nuances behind Chinese students' reluctance to speak up. Grimshaw (2007) and Ha and Li (2014) argued that Chinese students' lack of learner autonomy or critical thinking, silence in class, and reliance on limited learning strategies were all stereotypes from earlier studies. Chinese students were seen more and more often to engage in autonomous and problem-solving activities. Echoing their findings, we point out that Chinese students who are not as outspoken and more introverted should not be regarded as underqualified. Active class participation is not necessarily an efficient student-centred pedagogical approach, especially when students consider it meaningless or time-consuming to endlessly discuss simple questions. More

importantly, inactive participation does not always relate to a lack of motivation or active learning – remaining silent is more a matter of personality or personal choice, or rather a pedagogical approach towards better understanding and deeper processing.

Furthermore, our study also highlights the challenges that Chinese students encountered only in the unique Dutch-speaking context. For instance, the unfamiliarity with Dutch culture and a lack of adequate knowledge about the social context caused difficulty and frustration for the students. Different ways of thinking, expressing thoughts and argumentation, and particularly the perceived directness of Dutch classmates also caused miscommunication with students from diverse national backgrounds. Those factors further contributed to ineffective group learning. In addition, as Hofstede (1986) presented in his analysis, in low-power-distance societies, teachers expect students to initiate communication and find their own paths, while in high-power-distance societies, students expect teachers to initiate communication and outline paths to follow. Hence Chinese students reported that they were missing the guidance of teachers in the Dutch system, and found it unexpected and confusing to proceed in their studies. Teachers' support and instructions were also required by students who endeavoured to adjust to the very different and more challenging assessment criteria. Teachers in China, on the contrary, offered more support and guidance, even though they play a more dominant role in the teacher-student relationship. As for gender differences, the male students in our sample tend to have more difficulty than females in their language proficiency and in communicating with their supervisors. As Long et al.'s study (2009) confirmed that academically girls performed better, these two factors might have some negative impact on male students' academic performance.

The existing literature is not limited to the discussion of Chinese students, but reveals some assumptions about non-western students in general. Holliday (2005) pointed out the tendency to perceive non-western students as a 'reduced other' within Anglophone western academia. Their lack of some characteristics expected by western educators, such as learner autonomy or critical thinking, is considered as problematic. Consistent with such views, Grimshaw (2007) found such a construct of Asian learners rather problematic. Rather than 'fix' these learners, Gu and Schweisfurth (2006) suggested that it is essential to understand students' needs and that more emphasis should be placed upon adaptation by western universities to accommodate their international students. For the Chinese students coming from different pedagogical and cultural backgrounds to the Netherlands, more support needs to be provided by the Dutch HEIs, in order to facilitate their transition and adaptation. Instructional courses could be provided to enhance their cultural and social understanding and improve linguistic competence. It is necessary for lecturers to be well prepared as well, for accommodating their specific nature and characteristics. To better cater to their needs, lecturers need to promote genuine dialogue, provide more commitment and encouragement and build up supportive relationships. The findings also underscore the need for more support at the institutional level, to enhance the quality of English-taught programmes, such as lecturers' proficiency in English and their cross-cultural communication skills. As a wider implication for international students and teachers in western HE, understanding the cultural and pedagogical differences is the prerequisite for them to get involved in classroom practice – students need to get familiar with the teaching style of the host institutions and what learning approach is expected, while teachers should be aware of students' cultural backgrounds

and that there is no one-size-fits-all teaching approach. Since pedagogies cannot be prescribed (Lavia 2007), and there is no best classroom practice, pedagogical skills for teaching multicultural groups can always be adjusted and developed according to students' needs – hence an ongoing reflexive process and a truly student 'centred' pedagogy.

In terms of limitations, this study only set out to explore the experiences of 28 Chinese students at eight HEIs across the Netherlands; hence, the findings cannot be more broadly generalised. Future studies should consider taking a larger, more representative sample in order to use quantitative research methods to investigate whether the findings of this study can be generalised to all Chinese students at Dutch HEIs, or elsewhere.

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 internationalisation 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 Child Development and Education Department of 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

Lina Jiang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3493-3637>

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

References

- Alexander, R. J. 2001. "Border Crossings: Towards a Comparative Pedagogy." *Comparative Education* 37 (4): 507–523.
- Altbach, P. G. 2004. "Higher Education Crosses Borders: Can the United States Remain the Top Destination for Foreign Students?" *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 36 (2): 18–25.
- Altinyelken, H. K. 2011. "Student-centred Pedagogy in Turkey: Conceptualisations, Interpretations and Practices." *Journal of Education Policy* 26 (2): 137–160.
- Barnett, G. A., M. Lee, K. Jiang, and H. W. Park. 2016. "The Flow of International Students From a Macro Perspective: A Network Analysis." *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 46 (4): 533–559.
- Bartell, M. 2003. "Internationalization of Universities: A University Culture-based Framework." *Higher Education* 45 (1): 43–70.
- Biemans, H., and M. Van Mil. 2008. "Learning Styles of Chinese and Dutch Students Compared Within the Context of Dutch Higher Education in Life Sciences." *The Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension* 14 (3): 265–278.
- Bolsmann, C., and H. Miller. 2008. "International Student Recruitment to Universities in England: Discourse, Rationales and Globalization." *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 6 (1): 75–88.
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101.

- de Wit, H., F. Hunter, L. Howard, and E. Egron-Polak. 2015. *Internationalisation of Higher Education*. Brussels: European Parliament. Accessed December 22, 2018. http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL_STU%282015%29540370_EN.pdf.
- Durkin, K. 2008. "The Middle Way: East Asian Master's Students' Perceptions of Critical Argumentation in U.K. Universities." *Journal of Studies in International Education* 12 (1): 38–55.
- EC (European Commission). 2005. *Higher Education Institutions' Responses to Europeanisation, Internationalisation and Globalisation. Developing International Activities in a Multi-Level Policy Context*. EU Research on Social Sciences and Humanities. Accessed December 25, 2018. https://cordis.europa.eu/docs/publications/1001/100124101-6_en.pdf.
- EC (European Commission). 2018. "Learning Mobility Statistics." *Eurostat*. Accessed December 25, 2018. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Learning_mobility_statistics.
- ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), ESU (European Students' Union), EUA (European University Association) and EURASHE (European Association of Institutions in Higher Education). 2015. *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. Brussels. Accessed January 8, 2019. http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf.
- Grimshaw, T. 2007. "Problematising the Construct of 'the Chinese Learner': Insights From Ethnographic Research." *Educational Studies* 33 (3): 299–311.
- Gu, Q., and M. Schweisfurth. 2006. "Who Adapts? Beyond Cultural Models of 'the Chinese Learner.'" *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 19 (1): 54–73.
- Ha, P. L., and B. Li. 2014. "Silence as Right, Choice, Resistance and Strategy Among Chinese 'Me Generation' Students: Implications for Pedagogy." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 35 (2): 233–248.
- Han, H. S., E. Vomvoridi-Ivanović, J. Jacobs, Z. Karanxha, A. Lypka, C. Topdemir, and A. Feldman. 2014. "Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Higher Education: A Collaborative Self-study." *Studying Teacher Education* 10 (3): 290–312.
- Haskel, B. G. 2008. *When Can a Weak Process Generate Strong Results? Entrepreneurial Alliances in the Bologna Process to Create a European Higher Education Area*. Center for European Studies Working Paper Series #165. Accessed December 2, 2018. https://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~ces/publications/docs/pdfs/CES_165.pdf.
- Heffernan, T., M. Morrison, P. Basu, and A. Sweeney. 2010. "Cultural Differences, Learning Styles and Transnational Education." *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 32 (1): 27–39.
- Hofstede, G. 1986. "Cultural Differences in Teaching and Learning." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 10 (3): 301–320.
- Holliday, A. 2005. *The Struggle to Teach English as an International Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hong, T., F. N. Pieke, L. Steehouder, and J. L. van Veldhuizen. 2017. *Dutch Higher Education and Chinese Students in the Netherlands*. Leiden: Leiden Asia Centre.
- Klemencic, M. 2019. *Successful Design of Student-Centered Learning and Instruction (SCLI) Ecosystems in the European Higher Education Area*. A Keynote at the XX Anniversary of the Bologna Process. Accessed September 19, 2019. http://bolognaprocess2019.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/02-keynote_KlemencicM.pdf.
- Lavia, J. 2007. "Repositioning Pedagogies and Postcolonialism: Theories, Contradictions and Possibilities." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 11 (3): 283–300.
- Li, H. 2017. "Academic Integration of Mainland Chinese Students in Germany." *Social Inclusion* 5 (1): 80–92.
- Li, H., and P. Pitkanen. 2018. "Understanding the Integration of Mainland Chinese Students: The Case of Finland." *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 8 (2): 107–115.
- Long, J., W. Yan, H. Yang, and J. P. van Oudenhoven. 2009. "Cross-cultural Adaptation of Chinese Students in the Netherlands." *US-China Education Review* 6 (9): 1–9.

- Luijten-Lub, A., M. van der Wende, and J. Huisman. 2005. "On Cooperation and Competition: A Comparative Analysis of National Policies for Internationalisation of Higher Education in Seven Western European Countries." *Journal of Studies in International Education* 9 (2): 147–163.
- Madge, C., P. Raghuram, and P. Noxolo. 2009. "Engaged Pedagogy and Responsibility: A Postcolonial Analysis of International Students." *Geoforum* 40: 34–45.
- McLaren, P. 1999. "A Pedagogy of Possibility: Reflecting Upon Paulo Freire's Politics of Education: In Memory of Paulo Freire." *Educational Researcher* 28 (2): 49–56.
- MOE (Ministry of Education, China). 2018. *2017 Sees Increase in Number of Chinese Students Studying Abroad and Returning after Overseas Studies*. Accessed November 30, 2018. http://en.moe.gov.cn/News/Top_News/201804/t20180404_332354.html.
- NUFFIC (Dutch Organisation for Internationalisation in Education). 2012. *The Needs and Wishes of Holland Alumni. Holland Alumni Barometer Part I*. Accessed November 25, 2018. <https://udocstore.nl/docs/c78498/holland-alumni-barometer-part-one>.
- NUFFIC (Dutch Organisation for Internationalisation in Education). 2013. *The Dutch Way of Teaching*. Accessed December 16, 2018. <https://www.studyinholland.nl/education-system/the-dutch-way-of-teaching>.
- NUFFIC (Dutch Organisation for Internationalisation in Education). 2017. *Incoming Student Mobility in Dutch Higher Education 2017–18*. Accessed December 8, 2018. <https://www.nuffic.nl/en/publications/incoming-student-mobility-dutch-higher-education-2017-2018/>.
- NUFFIC (Dutch Organisation for Internationalisation in Education). 2018. *International Offices*. Accessed December 5, 2018. <https://www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/international-offices/>.
- OCW (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Netherlands). 2013. *Make it in the Netherlands 2013–2016*. Accessed November 25, 2018. <https://www.government.nl/documents/reports/2013/11/25/actionplan-make-it-in-the-netherlands-2013-2016>.
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). 2018. *Education at a Glance 2018: OECD Indicators*. Paris: OECD. doi:10.1787/eag-2018-en
- Rienties, B., and D. Tempelaar. 2013. "The role of Cultural Dimensions of International and Dutch Students on Academic and Social Integration and Academic Performance in the Netherlands." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 37 (2013): 188–201.
- Rumbley, L. E., P. G. Altbach, and L. Reisberg. 2012. "Internationalization Within the Higher Education Context." In *The SAGE Handbook of International Higher Education*, edited by D. K. Deardorff, H. de Wit, J. D. Heyl, and T. Adams, 3–26. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Teddlie, C., and F. Yu. 2007. "Mixed Methods Sampling: A Typology With Examples." *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 1 (1): 77–100.
- Tigelaar, D. E., D. H. Dolmans, I. H. Wolfhagen, and C. van der Vleuten. 2004. "The Development and Validation of a Framework for Teaching Competencies in Higher Education." *Higher Education* 48 (2): 253–268.
- VSNU (Association of Universities in the Netherlands), and VH (The Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences). 2018. *Internationalisation Agenda for Higher Education*. Accessed December 14, 2018. <http://www.vsnu.nl/files/documents/Internationalisation%20Agenda%20for%20Higher%20Education.pdf>.
- Windschitl, M. 2002. "Framing Constructivism in Practice as the Negotiation of Dilemmas: An Analysis of the Conceptual, Pedagogical, Cultural, and Political Challenges Facing Teachers." *Review of Educational Research* 72 (2): 131–175.
- Zhou, Y. R., D. Knoke, and I. Sakamoto. 2005. "Rethinking Silence in the Classroom: Chinese Students' Experiences of Sharing Indigenous Knowledge." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 9 (3): 287–311.