The Pedagogy of Studying Abroad

A Case Study on Chinese Students in the Netherlands

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Abstract

With internationalization of higher education becoming a global trend, China is the country with the largest number of international students enrolled worldwide. This study explores Chinese students' views on and experiences in Dutch higher education: why they choose and how they perceive the education in the Netherlands, what differences they encounter in culture and classroom pedagogy, how these differences influence their learning experiences and how these experiences impact upon their identity negotiation. Thirty-seven in-depth interviews were conducted with thirty Chinese students and seven (another four responded to some questions through email) lecturers, international student advisors and admission officers from eight Dutch higher education institutions. The findings identified the influential aspects on their decisions including discouraging factors in Chinese education, the perceived benefits of a Dutch education as well as attractive policies in the Netherlands. In terms of cultural encounters, they tried to adapt to some differences, which they considered as necessary changes, while others remained challenging such as party culture and communication gap with Western peers due to different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, although they found the Dutch lecturing style similar to that in China, they were confronted with various difficulties and challenges in classroom pedagogy such as classroom participation, group work and presentation, examination and assessment, cultivation of critical thinking and creativity, and different roles of teachers. Finally, they regarded their experiences overseas as generally positive, despite that some were subjected to prejudice and discrimination. In the process of negotiation in the multi-cultural environment, they witnessed themselves evolving into independent, self-confident and responsible adults with stronger and more open minds. At the same time, most of them exhibited a strong attachment to their Chinese identity. The results of this study contribute to discussions concerning culture adaptation, identity negotiation, and pedagogical experiences within the domain of internationalization of higher education, while hoping to provide insights and implications on how Western higher education institutions can better cater to the needs of international students.

Key words: internationalization, higher education, Chinese students, the Netherlands, motivation, culture adaptation, pedagogy, identity negotiation

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List of Abbreviations

CRP	culturally responsive pedagogy
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
HE	higher education
HEI	higher education institution
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
NESO	Netherlands Education Support Offices
NUFFIC	Netherlands Organisation for International Co-operation in Higher Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OTS	Orange Tulip Scholarship
SBS	Social and Behavioral Sciences
SCL	student-centered learning
SCP	student-centered pedagogy
TCP	teacher-centered pedagogy
UK	United Kingdom
US(A)	United States (of America)
UvA	University of Amsterdam

Chapter 1. Introduction

This research study intends to provide new insights into the internationalization of higher education worldwide, by presenting a case study on Chinese international students in the Dutch higher education institutions (HEIs). The study aims to explore Chinese students' perceptions of and actual experiences in Dutch higher education institutions, to identify the differences they may encounter in culture and classroom pedagogy, to investigate how these differences influence their learning experiences and how these experiences impact upon their identity. In the 2016-2017 academic year, the total number of Chinese students enrolled at Dutch higher education institutions was 4,347 (Nuffic 2017), which make up the second largest international student group in the Netherlands, after the Germans. However, there has been little research on the Chinese students' experiences in Dutch higher education, especially on issues concerning pedagogy and identity negotiation. Based on the accounts of thirty young Chinese students in the Netherlands, this research attempts to bridge this gap and highlight the complex situations where they have been endeavoring to adjust or resist while negotiating with the multi-cultural learning environment.

1.1 Internationalization of Higher Education: The Global Trend and Europe

The internationalization of higher education is not a new phenomenon, as some countries have a long history in receiving foreign students (Luijten-Lub, Van der Wende & Huisman 2005). In the twentieth century, particularly in the period between the two World Wars, there was an increasing focus on international cooperation and exchange in higher education. Since the Second World War, American higher education has remained dominant in the international field. Nowadays the United States of America (USA) is still the most popular country for international students although its market share is declining. Meanwhile Europe, as well as Australia and Canada, has been developing internationalization strategies for higher education and gaining popularity increasingly (de Wit 2001; de Wit et al. 2015; University of Oxford 2015; OECD 2015). Since the late 1980s the research and discussions on

internationalization of higher education have been broadened and an increasing number of countries are engaging in the promotion of their higher education systems (de Wit 2001; Kolster 2014). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has calculated that in 2013 more than 4 million students were studying in tertiary education outside of their country of origin (OECD 2015). The underlying reasons for recruitment of foreign students were mainly social, political, cultural, and academic until the 1980s, whereas nowadays economic and financial issues are playing an increasingly important role (Bartell 2003; Luijten-Lub, Van der Wende & Huisman 2005).

In Europe, the internationalization as a strategic process began with ERASMUS, a program for cooperation within higher education, in the late 1980s, and this has been further reinforced by the Bologna Process since 1999 (de Wit 2001; Meny 2008). The process is a series of ministerial meetings and agreements on creation of a European Higher Education Area, with the main guiding document Bologna Declaration signed by ministers of education from 29 European countries. The main focus lies on the "Europeanization" of higher education, and the objectives include a common framework of understandable and comparable degrees, undergraduate and postgraduate levels in all countries, European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and free mobility of students (de Wit 2001; Litjens 2005). The Bologna Process has underscored the strategic role of higher education in the promotion of economic competitiveness and the need to make European higher education more attractive to students from other continents (Haskel 2009; Capano & Piattoni 2011).

1.2 Internationalization of Higher Education: The Netherlands

In the Netherlands the start of the student mobility can be linked to the "colonial past". In the decolonization period (1950s to 1960s), Institutes for International Education were set up whose objective was to be responsible for and contribute to the development of former colonies. Since the mid-1980s, European programs such as ERASMUS and Tempus have stimulated the internationalization of Dutch higher education, and the influences of such programs and policies have been substantial (de Wit et al. 2015). Following the Bologna Process, the Netherlands changed the original credit system to ECTS while introducing the Bachelor and Master programs, and has been encouraging institutions to offer courses in English in order to attract foreign students and to foster internationalization (European Commission 2005). A number of ministries have been involved in the promotion of Dutch higher education abroad, including the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences, the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Economic Affairs. Like most European countries, the Netherlands also has an agency, the Netherlands Organisation for International Co-operation in Higher Education (NUFFIC), which is responsible for "development co-operation, internationalization of higher education, international recognition and certification and the marketing of Dutch higher education" (European Commission 2005, p. 39). Foreign offices - the Netherlands Education Support Offices (NESO), have been set up in countries that are considered as "strategically important for Dutch higher education", namely Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Thailand, Turkey and Vietnam (Nuffic 2017)[1]. According to Nuffic, the total inflow of international students from countries with a Nuffic Neso office has grown more than 66% between 2006 and 2014 (Nuffic 2015).

The main rationale underlying the current policies for the internationalization of Dutch higher education is economic. A long-term objective is that the graduates are expected to facilitate future international business and trade relationships (European Commission 2005). 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 relatively low research capacity in this area (Luijten-Lub, Van der Wende & 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" (Make it in the Netherlands 2013-2016, p. 1).

1.3 Chinese Students in Western Higher Education

In the process of promoting higher education worldwide, Africa, Latin American and in particular Asian countries have been targeted by some European countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), the Netherlands and Germany. Asia is perceived as a large new market whose students have potentially great purchasing power (European Commission 2005). Currently China is the country with the largest number of international students enrolled worldwide (OECD 2015). As the expansion of Western higher education is perceived as an extension of the colonial legacy (Bolsmann & Miller 2008), it has been criticized for failing to adapt to the needs of international students (Hefferman et al. 2010). However, students from developing

[1] Accessed online at: https://www.nuffic.nl/english/about-us/international-offices.

countries tend to believe that Western higher education systems are more advanced in comparison to those in their home countries, including in China.

In the late 1990s, the Chinese government decided to expand the higher education sector so that an increasing number of students have been enrolled in HEIs ever since. Consequently, the Chinese higher education system has transformed "from an elitist to a mass system" (Wu & Zheng 2008, p. 5). The expansion has engendered many challenges for the Chinese government, including concerns about education quality. When asked about their impression on Chinese education system, many Chinese do not regard their own system as successful or of high quality (Wu & Zheng 2008; Moufahim & Lim 2015).

Research on Chinese students in Western higher education has mainly focused on their choices and experiences in English-speaking countries, such as the UK, the US, Australia and New Zealand (Bamber 2014; McMahon 2011; Simpson, Sturgess & Weight 2010; Moufahim & Lim 2015; Edwards & Ran 2006; Turner 2006). The factors that drive Chinese students to study overseas include university reputations, better job opportunities, cultivation of an international personhood, and improvement of foreign language ability. In addition, it has become an increasing trend for Chinese parents to pursue foreign education providers for their children as they are frustrated by the declining quality of higher education in China (Wu & Zheng 2008).

Studies in recent years have developed a fairly consistent set of characteristics that are believed to define the Chinese learners in the international education field. These include relative lack of learner autonomy, lack of critical thinking, silence in class, and reliance on a limited range of learning strategies, especially rote memorization (Ballard 1996, cited in Grimshaw 2007; Hammond & Gao 2002; Atkinson 1999). Some literature relates the behaviors of Chinese learners to the Confucian culture. For instance, the deference that Chinese students show to their teachers is believed to be the heritage of Confucian ethic (Hu 2002). However, Watkins and Biggs (2001) emphasize the positive aspects of a "Confucian Heritage" education, and Grimshaw (2007) argues that Chinese students are also seen to have engaged in autonomous, problem-solving activities, contrary to Western stereotype.

1.4 Research Questions

Given the current trends in internationalization of higher education and the promotion agenda

of the government agency, this thesis intends to understand the Chinese students' perceptions of the Dutch higher education and their actual educational experiences. More importantly, the contrasting cultural and classroom contexts (Chinese versus Dutch) add more colors to this research - in scrutinizing the influences of such differences in culture and pedagogy on their learning experiences, as well as their resistance or adjustment to such differences. While these are some of the aspects this thesis aims to cover, it is equally important to discover the (re)construction process of their identity throughout their pursuance of Dutch education - for instance, whether or not the achievement of personal independence changes their perceptions towards themselves, and the broadened life experiences facilitate the development into their new selves.

The main research question addressed in this study is as follows:

How do cultural and pedagogical differences influence Chinese students' learning experiences in Dutch higher education institutions, and how do these experiences impact upon their identity?

Six sub-questions were developed in order to respond to the main research questions:

1) What are the factors that motivate Chinese students to pursue their higher education in the Netherlands?
2) What are the general views of Chinese students on their education in the Netherlands?
3) What cultural differences do they encounter in Dutch higher education institutions?
4) How do they reflect on classroom pedagogy and what differences do they observe in comparison to their previous education in China?
5) How do these cultural differences and pedagogical approaches shape and influence their learning experiences?
6) What are the impacts of these learning experiences on their identity as Chinese students?

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

This research explores thirty Chinese students' perceptions of and actual experiences in eight higher education institutions in the Netherlands. Chapter Two provides an overview of relevant studies and a theoretical framework that are helpful to understand the analysis of the thesis. Chapter Three describes the methods and the procedures of this qualitative research.

Chapter Four explores the various reasons why Chinese students preferred to further their study overseas and why they chose the Netherlands. Chapters Five and Six identify the differences they have encountered in culture and classroom pedagogy respectively. Chapter Seven investigates the influence of their learning experiences on the perceptions of their own identity. Finally, the thesis concludes by responding to the research questions, discussing the implications of the study for policy and practice, and giving further research suggestions.

1.6 Significance of the Study

As international higher education is becoming increasingly prevalent among Chinese students in the past decade, the Dutch higher education has attracted thousands of them to the Netherlands (Nuffic, 2017). While existing academic literature have documented the experiences of Chinese students in English-speaking countries, the trend of Chinese students coming into the Dutch higher education with different (and sometimes conflicting) cultural nuances and pedagogical experiences has not been given much attention. It is highly relevant and critical to uncover the challenges faced by the substantial international student population as they adapt to a more student-centered Dutch pedagogy. The academic significance of this study lies in the fact that it represents an attempt to identify, document and evaluate the first-hand experiences of this group by using their own voices. Through the empirical evidence gathered from the narratives and stories of Chinese students, this study shall contribute to three areas of research commonly studied within the domain of internationalization of higher education: culture adaptation, identity negotiation, and pedagogical experiences.

Chinese students are the largest group of international students worldwide. However, they mostly remain as statistics in policy papers devoid of stories on what transpires and what they confront during their studies away from home. The experiences and voices of Chinese students merit to be documented and heard, as this shall "testify to the provision of quality education" (Gu 2009, p. 39). The narratives of the Chinese students in this study can offer insights for policies on international higher education and classroom pedagogy to be more culturally sensitive and socially engaged. This research hopes to contribute to raising awareness among academics, administrators and policy makers about how international and multicultural learning environment bring about changes, challenges, growth and development in Chinese students and other international students. From a practice standpoint, this study is also timely for the higher education institutions in the midst of considerable changes that they undergo to make education delivery more effective. Moreover, the results of this study also

endeavor to inform prospective Chinese students wishing to study abroad of their choices of where to study, what to expect and what challenges they might encounter. Finally, this study hopes to have academic and societal significance through the implications for policy and practice and pedagogical insights - for the improvement of education quality in higher education in general and on how Western higher education institutions can better cater to the needs of international students in particular.

Chapter 2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Postcolonial Theory

This research intends to investigate the impacts of classroom pedagogy and cultural differences on Chinese students in the Dutch higher education institutions through the lens of postcolonial theory. The idea of postcolonialism, in recent years, has been discussed extensively in a wide variety of literature (Rizvi et al. 2006; Manathunga 2006; Rizvi 2007; Lavia 2007). It has not been used only in various ways to "name the residual, persistent and ongoing effects of European colonization", but also it has been criticized for "deeply politicizing the academy" (Rizvi et al. 2006, p. 249).

However, the terms postcolonial and postcolonialism are difficult to define. Gilbert and Tompkins, in *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (1996), maintain that "colonization is insidious…its effects shape language, education, religion, artistic sensibilities, and, increasingly, popular culture". Hence a postcolonial theory must "respond to more than the merely chronological construction of post-independence, and to more than just the discursive experience of imperialism" (p. 657). To conceptualize postcolonial, Stuart Hall suggested unpacking its complexity rather than seeking to define it (Lavia 2007). Hall (1999) states that "we don't know exactly what it means. It doesn't mean what it obviously means…I need to question it, to turn it around, to acknowledge where its weaknesses are, its gaps and aporias; and nevertheless I want to keep occupying it because it seems to me to say something absolutely important, and I know of no other way of saying it" (p. 1).

Drawing upon recent studies, postcolonial theory suggests that colonialism and imperialism are persistent on an ideological level, especially in the global education field (Manathunga 2006; Lavia 2007; Luke 2010). It draws attention to the power structures which create the boundary between the West and the East, where the former is constituted as forward and advancing while the latter being backward and stagnant (Echtner & Prasad 2003). Hence in

the context of internationalization and globalization, the expansion of Western higher education represents the superiority of the Western value, and can be understood as an extension of the colonial legacy and a continuous support to imperial interests (Bolsmann & Miller 2008). According to Joel Samoff (2003), education institutions in the colonized world reproduced "not only the curriculum, pedagogy, and hierarchical organization of their European models but even their architecture and staff and student codes of conduct" (p. 3). Under the influence of the global diffusion of Western ideas, both borrowing and imposition have occurred in developing countries. Samoff (2003) points out that "in the modern era, with few exceptions, the direction of influence is from European core to southern periphery" (p. 3).

There has been criticism about postcolonial theory, for instance, on its complicity with the new structures of imperial power within the age of global capitalism (Rizvi 2007, p. 260). However, we could still use it as an analytical and theoretical tool to enable us, those who work on global education development, to take a critical look at ourselves and the theoretical assumptions underpinning our practice (Manathunga 2006). Postcolonial may be perceived as a cultural imperialistic drive to perpetuate the nature of knowledge, education and wellbeing, and a threat to non-Western ways of conceiving the world (Akomolafe & Dike 2011; Moufahim & Lim 2015). This approach is important, for according to Rizvi (2005), postcolonial theory can perform a valuable role in showing how "contemporary social, political, economic and cultural practices continue to be located within the processes of cultural domination through the imposition of imperial structures of power" (Rizvi 2007, p. 257).

2.2 Pedagogy

2.2.1 Definition

Pedagogy is an academic subject or theoretical concept that has been widely discussed in the education field. Among the various definitions, 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" (p. 513). Based on Alexander's theory, the pedagogy in this study will then be discussed along with its two central acts -

teaching and learning, especially different styles and roles of students and teachers in various educational contexts. Issues related to classroom practice such as classroom activities and the interaction between teachers and students, will also be covered as well as broader issues including individual and group learning, examinations and assessment.

2.2.2 Postcolonial Pedagogical Approaches in Internationalization of Higher Education

There is a wide range of literature concerning pedagogy in the internationalization of higher education, although none of them talks specifically about impacts of Dutch higher education on Chinese students. 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. Hence pedagogies have to be developed from a postcolonial stance, in pursuance of inclusive educational practices and social justice (p. 297).

Madge et al. (2009) adopts a postcolonial analysis of international students in the higher education of the UK. It has been criticized that British academic practices are focused actively on "the aftermath and continuation of colonialism" (Gilmartin & Berg 2007, p. 123), and academics' responsibilities towards students are influenced partially by the history of colonialism (p. 35). Thus Madge et al. (2009) have a comprehensive discussion about care and responsibility through the lens of postcolonial theory, and call for an "engaged pedagogy" in the UK higher education system. Based on Bell Hooks' instructive concept that an engaged pedagogy cares for the souls of students (Hooks 1994, cited in Madge et al. 2009), the authors suggest that an engaged pedagogy involves genuine dialogue, one "that must contest the hegemonic discourse of western 'best practice'" (p. 43), and emphasizes the recognition of the existence and value of multiple realities and knowledges. Educators, as both practitioners and human beings, have the responsibility to be aware of their commitment to students, and the ways they are teaching, empowering rather than discriminatory. This pedagogical engagement needs to "manifest itself well beyond teaching practice and into everyday practices of caring and responsiveness beyond the classroom, to understand how historically produced political structures, institutional cultures and policies shape international student experiences and recruitment" (Madge et al. 2009, p. 43).

Ladson-Billings (1995) describes culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) as an approach that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural

referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The use of cultural referents in teaching bridges and explains the mainstream culture, while valuing and recognizing students' own cultures. For educators and students, both as human beings, understanding each other's culture mediates teaching and learning. Han et al. (2014) suggest that culture is central to student learning and that CRP not only identifies the importance of academic achievement but also maintains cultural identity and heritage. Their study points to the need for stronger support for this approach, although there are still tensions in enacting CRP, including the push-back and resistance from students, and tensions created by the higher education institutional structure, such as large class sizes and a limited number of courses connected to CRP within the curriculum (Han et al. 2014). It has been difficult to identify particular practices within the framework of CRP, whereas this study points out the importance of building up supportive relationships between educators and students. From the postcolonial lens, CRP is meaningful in the sense that it enables international students to develop a critical consciousness, to recognize the diversity of cultures, and to reflect on their own beliefs.

There has also been discussion about adopting a critical pedagogy in international higher education. This concept can be traced back to Paulo Freire's early work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 30th anniversary ed. 2005). Freire believed education to be a political act that could not be divorced from pedagogy and that the way students are taught and what they are taught serves a political agenda (McLaren 1999). Therefore, the primary task of critical pedagogy is to challenge ideology and the learners must approach and understand the world through their own efforts. "Their acts of knowing are to be stimulated and grounded in their own being, experiences, needs, circumstances, and destinies" (McLaren 1999, p. 51). As for the teachers, McLaren (1997) has also stressed the importance of understanding students' culture and developing a student-centered educational process while, at the same time, recognizing their crucial role in helping students become critical thinkers and activists. Some recent studies, from a postcolonial perspective, have further expanded and enriched Freire's initial approach to this pedagogy. Pitts and Brooks (2016) believe that a critical pedagogy helps students to maintain a critical approach towards knowledge and serves to challenge mainstream beliefs. Andreotti (2011) highlights the importance of promoting critical global citizenship education, pointing out that we, consequently, will be pulled away from "hegemonic and eurocentric forces of global education" (Pitts and Brooks 2016, p. 4), and will be empowered to understand global issues and world cultures.

2.2.3 Student-Centered Pedagogy in Europe and the Netherlands

Student-centered learning (SCL) theory and practice have originated from the constructivist learning theory, which is based on the works of Jean Piaget (1896-1980), Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) and John Dewey (1859-1952) (Altinyelken 2011). This term has been widely used by a number of actors, such as higher education policy makers, yet it does not have a universally-agreed definition (European Students' Union 2010). Dewey emphasized the importance of students' needs and interest to learn, active engagement and initiative during the constructive process of knowledge acquisition (Altinyelken 2011; Bada 2015). The student-centered pedagogy (SCP) indicates that the student is at the heart of the learning process. It promotes learning by doing, or active learning rather than simple repetition or accumulation of knowledge. While traditional pedagogy is always criticized as making students receive information passively and failing to cultivate students' capacities to be innovative, the learner-centered approach has been viewed as superior in preparing children and youth for the world of work (Altinyelken 2011).

There has been a wide range of studies on the learner-centered approach in the past decade, among which some are advocating teachers to become more student-centered, while others are critiquing the practical use of the approach in diverse contexts. For instance, some teachers believe that this approach provides a more effective learning environment (Wright 2011). Another research has also found it to be especially beneficial for students when multicultural issues were discussed and a wide variety of perspectives was presented (Mahendra et al. 2005). In comparison, various studies have demonstrated its inefficiency in improving students' affective and academic skills (Gauthier & Dembele 2004, cited in Altinyelken 2010a). Tabulawa (2003) argues that the diffusion of this pedagogy in the "Third World" is a result of the growing interest of the international aid agencies, who are promoting values related to liberal democracy.

In European higher education, there has been growing interest in promoting student-centered learning. Following the Bologna Process, considerable progress has been made over the past few decades to assure quality education in higher education intuitions, which has contributed to the shift towards student-centered learning and teaching. One of the key drivers is to ensure that Europe will be globally competitive as the SCL is viewed as advanced in improving students' learning experience (European Students' Union 2010; ESG 2015). Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2015) clearly

states the requirement for applying the SCL approach:

> 1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment
>
> Standard:
>
> Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.
>
> Guidelines:
>
> Student-centred learning and teaching plays an important role in stimulating students' motivation, self-reflection and engagement in the learning process. This means careful consideration of the design and delivery of study programmes and the assessment of outcomes. (p. 13)

However, at both national and institutional levels, the policies promoting SCL may vary within each particular context, as well as shaping what is meant by the notion. As reported in a survey initiated by European Students' Union and Education International, while there is wider public discussion in some countries, only one existing policy has been identified in a few countries such as Denmark, Romania and Switzerland. In the UK, SCL is being promoted by the Higher Education Academy and the UK's quality assurance agency, whereas in countries like Ireland, Hungary and Luxembourg there is not any national policy for promotion of SCP (European Students' Union 2010b).

Nevertheless, the paradigm shift from teacher- to student-centered learning has implications on the education system in the Netherlands. On the website "studyinholland.nl" initiated by Nuffic, an introduction to the Dutch education system highlights the Dutch way of teaching: The Dutch teaching style is interactive and student-centered, and students are encouraged to gain valuable skills such as problem-solving and critical thinking, and to "develop an open mind through interactive learning"; It centers on students working together as a team and on self-study while teachers will act as a facilitator and guide in the learning process; Interaction in class is highly appreciated, as well as being critical of what lecturers or other students say; Individual opinions and convictions are respected, which "is not limited to education institutions", but the foundation for the country's "diverse and plural society" (Nuffic 2013)[2].

[2] Accessed online at: https://www.studyinholland.nl/education-system/the-dutch-way-of-teaching.

2.2.4 Pedagogical Traditions and Reforms in China

China's education system has a long history of standardized tests, thus the traditional teaching and learning process focuses on teaching to the test and helping students achieve high scores in exams. In recent years, there has been increasing criticism on this exam-oriented system (Dello-Iacovo 2009). Parents, teachers and education specialists have been concerned about students who are only able to learn through memorization and cramming, and who are suffering from the lack of creativity, the ability to think critically and the courage to question. Since the last two decades Chinese government has been promoting the curriculum and pedagogical reforms, in pursuance of well-rounded talents in the global economy scene. The reforms outline the urgent need to reduce both students' workload and the importance of exams, advocate for the comprehensive development of intelligence and personality and the cultivation of psychological quality, and urge the examination-oriented teaching methodology to give way to more modern teaching methods (Dello-Iacovo 2009). In 2001 the Ministry of Education issued the "Guidelines for Basic Education Curriculum Reform (pilot)", which require that teachers actively interact with students in the teaching process to stimulate their motivation for learning. Emphases have been placed on student participation and on cultivation of practical and creative skills and a spirit of innovation (Wang 2011). This signifies the transitions from exam-oriented education to quality education, and from teacher-centered pedagogy to student-centered pedagogy.

The global diffusion of student-centered pedagogy has profound implication for the teaching and learning approach in China's education system. This pedagogical approach is considered as a good practice in Western education systems, hence it is viewed as the Western best practice by the Central Government and a well-established educational approach (Altinyelken 2010a; Carney 2008). However, a wide variety of studies have indicated that it is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Many developing countries have been trying to advocate SCP due to various reasons, whereas different countries have encountered a variety of challenges in the process and have achieved different results (Altinyelken 2010b; Altinyelken 2011; de la Sablonnière, et al. 2009; Nykiel-Herbert 2004; Serbessa 2006).

In some countries such as Turkey (Altinyelken 2011), Uganda (Altinyelken 2010b), Kyrgyzstan (de la Sablonnière, et al. 2009), and Ethiopia (Serbessa 2006), the lack of adequate learning resources, inappropriate curricular materials and poor teacher training have been reported to be some of the main challenges facing teachers. In the case of Ethiopia, the

researcher also finds out that as a result of the Ethiopian tradition of child upbringing, students are expected to be silent in class and they lack experience in actively participating in the teaching and learning process, which strongly affects the implementation of a student-centered teaching approach (Serbessa 2006). In Uganda and Turkey, the large class sizes, the examination systems, and parental opposition are also challenges that teachers encounter while applying active learning strategy (Altinyelken 2010b; Altinyelken 2011).

Similarly, most of the above discussed problems apply to the case of China. Lee (2009) find out from their research that teachers received little support and needed training to update their pedagogical knowledge and skills. Dello-Iacovo's study (2009) also indicates that in 69.92% of municipalities and 80.63% of counties, there is a definite or major gap between the educational resources and the curriculum reform requirements. Wang (2011) points out that rural teachers' pedagogical choices are also greatly constrained by both the curriculum and class schedule. Other difficulties include large classroom sizes, unchanged examination system, parents' opposition and ineradicable traditional Chinese culture (Lee 2009; Dello-Iacovo 2009; Tan 2015). Hence the student-centered pedagogy has been interpreted in various ways, or has received reluctance or resistance from teachers, especially those with more years' experience in their career (Borg & Zheng 2014).

2.2.5 Concluding remarks

Hence to compare the different pedagogical experiences in two different educational contexts, it is important to understand what pedagogical approaches the Chinese students in this research experienced in their previous education in China. Did their teachers completely copy the Western pedagogical mode, or stick to their traditional way of teaching and learning? Or did they find a balance between the two, which adopts Western ideas and preserves the Chinese traditions? An equally indispensable part of this study will investigate their experiences in classroom pedagogy in the Dutch universities. Biemans and Van Mil's early study (2008) on Chinese students in the Dutch higher education indicates that they adhere to their "Chinese learning style": they begin with the intake of knowledge and understand material by memorizing. Thus it remains a challenge for them to "fully grasp the subject matter" (p. 274). Furthermore, according to Biemans and Van Mil (2008), they lack confidence in their own capacities to succeed, which, along with their learning style, has made it difficult for them to study successfully in the new Dutch learning environment. Then what learning style was adopted by the Chinese students in the present study when studying in

the Dutch context? What difficulties and challenges did they encounter, and how did these shape and influence their learning experiences? These questions will be addressed in the finding chapters that follow.

2.3 Negotiating Identity

"We live in a world where identity matters" (Gilroy 1997, p. 301), but what is identity? Is it about who we are and where we are from? How do we identify ourselves? Do we perceive ourselves the same way that others perceive us? According to Oxford Dictionary, identity of a person is "the fact of being who a person is", or in other words, "the characteristics determining who a person is"[3]. However, Woodward, in her book *Questioning Identity: Gender, Class, Ethnicity* (2004) states that, characteristics, or personality, is only part of the story. The other part of it requires an active engagement on our part, how we choose to identity ourselves with a particular identity. A person may have multiple identities, a daughter, a wife, an academic, a teacher, meanwhile a student studying sociology. Marked by both similarities and differences, identity is not only about who we are, but also about who we are not; how we are similar to some people and different from the others. Furthermore, combing how we see ourselves and how others see us, identity "provides a link between individuals and the world in which they live" (Woodward 2004, p. 7).

Since there is a link between the individual and the social, and we are now living in a multi-cultural world that is always changing or fluid rather than fixed, identification then becomes a tricky concept. Stuart Hall believed identity to be an ongoing product of history and culture, rather than a finished product. He (1996) discusses identity in a discursive approach, which sees identification "as a construction, a process never completed". As it is always "in process", it is never determined "in the sense that it can always be 'won' or 'lost', sustained or abandoned" (p. 3). How identity is constructed depends on how we define ourselves, how we make meaning out of ourselves, and how we negotiate with our surroundings. Chris Weedon, in *Identity and Culture* (2004), drawing directly on the work of Hall, focuses on how people negotiate identity and difference in postcolonial multi-cultural societies. "Negotiating difference includes issues of conflicting cultures and values and their effects on identity" (Weedon 2004, p. 4).

[3] Accessed online: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/identity.

There is plenty of discussion on the question of identity in acculturation literature, but not much about how international students negotiate their identity when entering a new country (Arias-Valenzuela et al. 2016; Kim 2012). Arias-Valenzuela et al. (2016) explored in their study the role of linguistic variables in the acquisition of a new cultural identity among international students in Canada. The study concluded that the specific identity that the students take on is influenced by the fluency of the language. Research on Asian international students in the United States has suggested that this group of students has more difficulties in fitting into the dominant culture and therefore their identity negotiation becomes more challenging. However, this has revealed the American ideology of cultural homogeneity: people with different cultures and languages should conform to canon and norms of Eurocentric culture, which is the representative of the dominant culture in American society (Hsieh 2006a). In the study on female Chinese international students in the second-language higher education, Hsieh (2006b) found that the participants had to reconstruct their identities within the frame of exclusion because some Americans they have encountered assume their culture as superior. Furthermore, as Asians tend to emphasize the importance of patience, harmony, respect, and deference (Lin & Yi 1997), most participants negotiate their identities mainly for the purpose of acquiring intrapersonal harmony and a positive self-identity (Hsieh 2006b).

Some research also investigates the correlation between identification and prejudice and discrimination that international students have experienced or rather, perceived in the host countries. Branscombe et al. (1999) pointed out that attributions to prejudice and discrimination are likely to enhance minority group identification, and that one reason is people's desire to feel that they belong. Reversely, minority group identification increases the likelihood of making attributions to prejudice, suggested by Crocker and Major (1989). Schimitt et al. (2002) also testified this "rejection-identification model" by investigating how perceptions of rejection by the host community are related to a sense of identification among international students in the United States.

Norma Koehne (2005) looked at the ways that international students in Australia constructed, and in the process, reconstructed their identities. This research presents stories about how some international students felt being part of the community of international students, but "other" to Australian students. It also investigates how they have changed but meanwhile did not want to give up certain values. Those findings have reflected the metaphor invoked in Bauman's *Making and Unmaking of Strangers* (1995): contemporary men and women in our

society suffer “from a chronic absence of resources with which they could build a truly solid and lasting identity, anchor it and stop it from drifting” (p. 8). An essential part of this study investigates how Chinese students construct or reconstruct their identities in Dutch higher education institutions, a multi-cultural society. Drawing upon the previous studies and the theories of Hall and Bauman, this thesis will then present the stories about Chinese students’ constant movement of floating and drifting in seeking identities and belonging.

2.4 Conclusion

The postcolonial approach provides lenses to understand pedagogical and cultural implications in the global education field, especially in the expansion of higher education internationally. This approach is crucial to this research, as it enables us to understand Chinese students’ perceptions and experiences in classroom pedagogy as well as in a Western society. In the research result chapters, findings about educational practices, issues of culture and identity will be presented. Through the postcolonial lens, this study will not only discuss their perceptions of the quality of Western / Dutch higher education, but also about how they confront Western discourses of educational studies, how they resist or are empowered by Western values, and how they negotiate with their identities under such influence.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This research is qualitative and has adopted an interpretive approach. The fieldwork has been carried out in Amsterdam. Thirty interviews with Chinese students have been conducted, which provide a thorough investigation of Chinese students' opinions and reflections regarding their learning experiences in Dutch higher education institutions. More specifically, the issues that have been covered during the interviews are: the factors that motivate them to study in the Netherlands, their views on education in Dutch higher education institutions, differences they encounter in culture and classroom pedagogy compared to previous education in China, the influences of cultural and pedagogical differences on their learning experiences, and the impacts of these learning experiences on their identity as Chinese students.

Seven lecturers, international student advisors and admission officers, who have had experience of teaching or working with Chinese students, were also interviewed, and another four responded to some questions through email.

3.2 Accessing Participants and Procedure

The initial plan was to interview the Chinese students at the University of Amsterdam (UvA), the country's largest higher education institution. As the highest ranked university in the Netherlands, UvA hosted 3,331 international students in the academic year 2015-2016. The intended sample was Chinese students studying at the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences (SBS) and Faculty of Humanities. The two faculties have more courses that require interactions and discussions and it would be interesting to compare them with the students' previous education in China. The number of students was thirty, including both bachelor and

master students, with an even distribution of female and male students. The fieldwork started at the end of October 2016, and the researcher had hoped to finish by the end of the year.

Although there are many Chinese students studying in Amsterdam, the researcher did not know any personally, nor did she have any contact with Chinese students' community. Approaching the students was much more difficult than expected, as the researcher could not get access through student administration. The student service or the international office was not able to provide Chinese students' information because of privacy reasons. The researcher kept searching online and trying to look for useful information on different websites that are popular among Chinese students. Finally, one student's WeChat ID was found on a very famous social networking website called Douban. WeChat is a widely used cellphone application in China. With the help of this student, the researcher was introduced to one student group on WeChat, from which, she reached some participants by snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a common method for building a sampling frame for small populations that are not easy to reach. Participants with whom contact has already been made can use their social networks to refer the researcher to other people who could potentially participate in or contribute to the study (Johnson 1990; Bernard 2002).

However, most of the group were new students of the academic year 2016-2017 and they had been in UvA only for two or three months. As this research would look at influence on identity and reflections on comparing different pedagogical cultures, it was important to find students with longer stay. Besides, there did not seem to be many Chinese students majoring in SBS or Humanities. Regarding those problems, the researcher decided not to limit to those two faculties, and to expand the sample to a wider approach. As more and more contacts were set up, the researcher was able to access Chinese students' association and student networks on social media, through which, students studying in various programs in different years were reached.

The sample selection was then reformulated to include all of those who volunteered to participate. First-year students might give interesting inputs regarding questions on motivation and culture, while others with longer stay could discuss more about identity related questions. Participants were put into three categories: I) the ones who started their study in 2016 and had only a few months' experiences; II) those who had been here for more than a year and are still studying; III) and those who already finished study and had been working ever since, or resumed their study after working for some time. For each of the

categories, ten students, five males and five females, were included. Moreover, the sample was expanded to eight higher education institutions in the whole country instead of only one, namely, University of Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Hogeschool van Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, Wageningen University, Maastricht University, HZ University of Applied Sciences, Fontys University of Applied Sciences and Nyenrode Business Universiteit.

By the middle of December, 26 student interviews were conducted. As one male student for Category II and three more for Category III were needed, purposive sampling was used, which is also a commonly used method when participants with a similar characteristic or of small size are needed in case studies (Teddlie & Yu 2007). It might be interesting to note here that accessing female students had been easier, while the researcher was turned down a few times by males. Girls seemed to be more willing to share their experiences and thoughts, while boys appeared to be more evasive. Reasons for refusal were not enquired, whereas one boy did mention that he was not a successful person, and that he "was not worth interviewing". As many students were getting ready for their exams, the fieldwork had to be paused, and renewed after the New Year holidays. The researcher tried continuously to contact people for more participants. It was then already the beginning of March 2017 when the last interview with a male student was conducted. In total, participants include 1 pre-bachelor student, 7 bachelors, 16 masters, 3 students doing their second masters, and 3 PhD candidates, among whom, there are 15 male students and 15 females (see Table 1 for more information of the participants).

Gaining access to lecturers, international student advisors and admission officers was also not so easy a process that the researcher spent two months trying and waiting to reach those who possibly had sufficient contact with Chinese students through emails. Potential participants were selected randomly, but from different faculties including Social and Behavioral Sciences, Economics and Business, Humanities, and Science. There were a few cases where lecturers were willing to help, but they had so few Chinese students that they worried that what they were able to share was not representative enough for research purposes. Towards the end of the fieldwork in early March, which was actually two months behind the initial schedule, seven interviews were conducted and four responses through emails were received. Among those, there are 4 male and 5 female lecturers, 1 male international advisor, and 1 female admission officer.

Table 1 List of Participants (students)

Length of stay	Description	Degree of study	Number of students		Total
			Female	Male	
About three months	Studying, no working experiences in NL	Pre-bachelor		1	10
		Bachelor	1	2	
		Master	4	1	
		PhD		1	
More than one year	Studying, no working experiences in NL	Bachelor	1	1	10
		Master	4	3	
		PhD		1	
More than one year	Working, or studying with working experiences in NL	Bachelor		2	10
		Master	3	1	
		The 2nd master	2	1	
		PhD		1	

3.3 Data Collection

Thirty-two face-to-face and five Skype interviews[4] were conducted on the availability of the interviewees. Most of the interviews took place in campus cafes and offices, and in a few cases in bars, cafes and restaurants around the city of Amsterdam. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended so that the participants were able to have more freedom to share their stories and experiences. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured and emphasized before all interviews started because of ethical considerations. With the respondents' permission, all interviews except one were recorded. During the interviews, the recorder was placed within the reach of all respondents, whereas none of them requested to switch it off even they were told they could do so if they did not feel comfortable. In the only one case where the participant was not willing to be recorded, the researcher took detailed notes to make sure there was no information missing. Interviews with students lasted between 40 and 80 minutes, while the ones with lecturers, student advisors and admission officers lasted 20 to 30 minutes. After the interviews, the researcher asked for participants' permission to stay in contact on WeChat or through email so that the follow-up was possible. In a few cases where interviewees wished to be informed about the research findings, the researcher promised to send a copy of the thesis.

The interviews with students were conducted in Chinese. As all the participants are native speakers of Chinese, this would ensure the easiness of communication and the accuracy of

[4] Skype interviews were conducted with those who did not study or live in Amsterdam, and were not sure whether they would come to Amsterdam in the following two months.

data. The interviews normally started with the researcher's self-introduction or some questions on the participants' personal information, such as "How old are you?", "Where in China are you from?", "What study are you doing here?", and general questions such as "How do you feel about life and study in the Netherlands so far?". The questions that followed were more specific, with the aim to cover all themes of the research, including "motivation", "experience", "pedagogy", "culture" and "identity". The interviews with lecturers, student advisors and admission officers were conducted in English. All interviews were transcribed verbatim in the original languages, either in Chinese or English.

During interviews, an active approach was adopted, which allowed the interviews being conducted in a free and casual style rather than strictly following a list of questions, so that the participants felt more comfortable when sharing very personal experiences. Whenever the participants or the researcher felt it was necessary to elaborate on certain topics, depending on the course of the conversation, it was always easy and possible to do so. In conventional approaches, the interviewee is epistemologically passive thus researchers may find it difficult to obtain accurate experiential information. In contrast, an active interview enlivens the image of the subject and the respondent creates meaning out of facts and details of experience actively and subjectively (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to study the data, which is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting themes within data (Braun & Clarke 2006). As responses to open-ended questions, the fully transcribed texts ranged from a single word to as complex as many pages (Saldana 2009). Thematic analysis enables a methodical systematization of textual data and allows a sensitive, insightful and rich exploration of a text's overt structures and underlying patterns (Attride-Stirling 2001).

To analyze the collected data, the researcher coded the transcripts of all the interviews using the program ATLAS.ti. Some initial codes were created and developed based on the theoretical review, such as "motivation", "cultural differences", "challenges / difficulties", "prejudice", "sense of belonging". After being read and re-read, some initial codes were deleted and others merged. This process was repeated and the final list was adapted to better address and incorporate emerging themes. The coded data was analyzed to establish main findings, so that the researcher was able to describe the phenomenon that is associated to the

research questions. Wherever necessary, the quotations of Chinese students that could demonstrate the findings were extracted and translated into English. The thematic analysis has assisted the researcher in going beyond the surface meanings of the data, "to make sense of the data and tell an accurate story of what the data means" (Braun & Clarke 2006).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The Chinese students were approached through either social networks or students' association. All of them read or heard about the research and volunteered to participate. Twenty-six out of thirty students even initiated the contact with the researcher. Therefore, it was their own free choice to share their opinions and experiences. All of them were above the age to give consent (above the age of 18). Lecturers, admission officers and international student advisors were reached through email hence only those who were willing to replied and participated. Before the interviews the nature and purpose of the study were explained, and the permission to record was sought. The participants were also informed of their right to refuse to take part in the interviews at any point and withdraw afterwards. Enough time was ensured, and a casual and easy atmosphere was created during the interviews, so that the respondents were able to share their views. It was also ensured that all participants had access to contacting the researcher, in case they decided not to allow her to use their stories. Furthermore, primary data has been used in the research analysis. To ensure the privacy of the data, confidentiality and anonymity are maintained strictly. The identities of the participants are not revealed throughout the study. Beyond that, usage of any secondary data from any source will be acknowledged with appropriate references.

3.6 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations observed in this study might be significant. First of all, as a Chinese international student, as well as a former teacher at a Chinese high school, the researcher has a deep understanding towards the Chinese students and the education system. This has facilitated the research process, including accessing the participants and the opportunity to converse in their native language. The researcher further acknowledges that her ethnic background (as a Chinese) and familiarity of Chinese culture may have also impacted on how she has analyzed the results of the study, specifically on the comparison of the Chinese and Dutch education systems and cultural experiences. Rest assured, the researcher

conscientiously employs reflexivity in presenting and analyzing the data so that it sensitively captures the voices of the Chinese participants based on their own views and perspectives.

The second limitation is related to the sample selection, which is common in qualitative research. The study did not consider the economic background of the Chinese students. Besides, the students were reached through social networks and participated in the research voluntarily. In that sense, most of them might share some common characteristics such as being socially active or being willing to help strangers or share their experiences with others. This might have caused a sampling bias by excluding those with different character traits or socio-economic backgrounds.

During the data analysis when exploring their sense of belonging and identity, the researcher was able to differentiate the students by categorizing them based on their lengths of stay in the Netherlands. However, due to the word limit, it was not possible to do so while investigating other issues including cultural encounters and classroom pedagogy. Neither was it realistic to analyze the differences among different levels of studies from bachelors, masters, to PhDs. Furthermore, the study focused on the reflections and experiences of thirty Chinese students, who represent only a small sample from the larger pool of the Chinese student community. The results of the study are not intended to represent the experiences of all the Chinese students in the Netherlands, hence generalizations beyond the thirty participants cannot be made based on this study.

Chapter 4. A Journey to the Netherlands

Studies on international students indicate that a large number of Chinese students have chosen English-speaking countries as their destinations. The various motivating factors for furthering studies overseas include frustration by the quality of Chinese higher education, institutional reputation, career development, personal growth, as well as cultural enrichment (Moufahim & Lim 2015; Wu 2014; Turner 2006; Mazzarol & Soutar 2002; Bodycott 2009; Wu & Zheng 2008). What are the factors that have motivated the Chinese students in this research to pursue their higher education in the Netherlands? This chapter will explore the reasons that have facilitated their choices.

4.1 Disappointing Realities in China

Many students interviewed mentioned some reasons for being unwilling to continue their studies in China's higher education institutions. Among them, one of the most frequent responses echoes the findings by Wu & Zheng (2008): students are not satisfied with the low quality of higher education in China's second- or third-class universities[5]. Students tend to agree that they will not achieve or learn anything in Chinese universities, unless they are able to enter the top ones such as Beijing University or Qinghua University. One of them shared the experience of studying in a third-class university:

> My university was really a bad one. I stayed there for two years until one day I thought I was done, and there was no future for me if I continued like this. Students in my university don't study. They just play games every day. I always don't agree that you have to study hard in order to have a good future. But for those people, something

[5] Universities in China include three tiers: at the top are key universities and tier-one universities, funded by the central government. Tier-two universities are mostly funded by provincial governments, while tier-three funded and run by private sectors. Tier-one and key universities are generally of higher quality than tier-two and –three. Students in this research refer to both tier-one and key universities as first-class universities, tier-two as second-class and tier-three as third-class. Source: http://wenr.wes.org/2016/03/education-in-china-2; http://baike.baidu.com.

> is wrong. They don't have any life goals. They just want to waste their life like that. It's meaningless. It's not that I look down upon them, but there are differences between us. In the 3rd year, I decided to quit and began to work, trying to figure out what I wanted to do in my life (Bruce[6], male, 21 years old).

Bruce mentioned that he did not do well in the National Higher Education Entrance Examination[7], which was why he ended up in a third-class university. In the 3rd year, he dropped out and tried different jobs, meanwhile he continued to learn English, preparing for International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and planning to further his study overseas. Frank had similar experience in another university:

> My university is first-class, but not among the best ones. I began to think, in my 1st year, that it was a waste of time being here, as it's not a "211" or "985"[8] university. That was when I decided to apply for a master's program outside China. I still managed to finish my bachelor's there, but I wasted some of my youth years. It was my own fault, as I didn't prepare well [for the National Higher Education Entrance Examination] (Frank, male, 23 years old).

The other factor that makes the students disappointed or at times even frustrated is the path most people perceive or follow in their life. One student summarized the popular sentiment as following:

> Why do your teachers encourage you to study hard for the Entrance Examinations? Because you can find a good job after graduation. For what? For making a lot of money. Why do you want to make money? Because then you can marry someone with whom you are well-matched in social and economic status. So what? So that you can have a baby, who will study hard and enter a good university and find a good job…that is, in your teachers' eyes, in most people's eyes, what you should do for your life. I don't want to study or work in such an environment (Alan, male, 18 years old).

The above accounts support the choice of some Chinese students to pursue their studies outside China due to dissatisfaction with the quality of Chinese higher education or disappointment at people's common norms in the Chinese society. Hence obtaining an education overseas, which they believe to have higher quality, would differentiate them from and give them an advantage over those studying in China. However, as there is a growing number of Chinese students attending higher education in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and Australia, what has driven these students to choose the Netherlands over

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[6] The names of all the students indicated in the thesis are pseudonyms.

[7] The National Higher Education Entrance Examination is an academic examination held annually in China. It is a prerequisite for entrance into almost all higher education institutions at the undergraduate level, usually taken by students in their last year of senior high school.

[8] "Project 211" and "Project 985" are two programs of the Chinese government, aiming to increase the research capacity of higher education institutions, and promote the development and reputation of the Chinese higher education system. There are 116 universities in Project 211 and 39 in Project 985, all among the best universities in China. The government assigned funding to each of the universities. Source: http://www.chinaeducenter.com/en/cedu/ceduproject211.php; http://baike.baidu.com.

other English-speaking countries? The section that follows will reveal their concerns about pursuing an education in those countries.

4.2 Discouraging Factors for Pursuing Education in English-Speaking Countries

When asked why they preferred to pursue an education in the Netherlands rather than other popular destinations, many students responded that they did consider countries such as UK, US, Canada or Australia. Among all the factors, one of the most discouraging one is the high tuition in those countries. One student commented:

> It is extremely difficult to get into the top universities in US. Besides, the tuition is too high. Let's say if you are lucky enough to be accepted into Columbia University. I am afraid that in the following ten years, you won't be able to make as much money as you spend on your tuition (Holly, female, 26 years old).

Some are also concerned about the quality of education since there are so many international students, especially Chinese students, in those countries. More importantly, as they have decided to further their studies in a foreign country, they would prefer a destination without too many Chinese. One student stated that 90 percent of his high school classmates were studying in the US or Canada, while another explained that 70 percent of people that she knew went to the UK:

> I heard from my friend [who is studying in UK] that they even have a Chinese teaching assistant, who couldn't explain everything so clearly in English. Once they had a problem but the TA didn't make herself understood so they waited until after class. Then the TA could explain to them in Chinese. That's why I gave up on UK (Bella, female, 22 years old).

Some pointed out the fact that spending too much time with fellow Chinese students would probably jeopardize the chance to improve their English. Moreover, as so many Chinese "Fuerdai" (a Chinese term for rich second generation, meaning the children of wealthy Chinese) flow into those countries, especially Australia, Frank mentioned, "the academic atmosphere has already been destroyed."

4.3 Perceived Benefits of a Dutch Education

The discouraging factors discussed in the above section hugely affect the student's choice of destination. Compared to countries like the US or the UK, the tuition fees are relatively lower in Dutch higher education institutions. Besides economic factors, the popularity of the

English language and high reputation of some higher education institutions in the Netherlands also contribute to these young people's decision-making:

> The Netherlands is a very old capitalist country, and they have been doing business since the 16th century. That's why they have really good business programs in universities. Besides, they teach in English and have very good English-speaking environment in universities. For Dutch people, English is also not their mother tongue, so maybe it is easier for international students to integrate (Henry, male, 26 years old).

According to students' responses, the other programs in Dutch higher education with high reputation or even with world-leading research capacity include Computer Science, Food Science and Technology, Cognitive Science, and Architecture.

Many participants also expressed their concern with employability and the importance of accumulating working experiences outside China. For some of them it does not sound reasonable to spend one year studying in a foreign country and then return home right upon graduation, since this will not increase their competitiveness in the Chinese employment market. Gaining some working experiences in the Netherlands, they believe however, will help them achieve a distinctive profile and increase the prospects of being employed by best companies. As mentioned in the 1st Chapter, the Netherlands has policies to attract talented international students to start their careers. Meanwhile the Ministry of Security and Justice provides residence permits of "orientation year" for highly educated people. Students who have completed an accredited Bachelor's or Master's program in the Netherlands have the right to apply for the permits[9]. This has greatly motivated the respondents to pursue their education in the Netherlands.

4.4 Attractive Policies in the Netherlands

Moreover, many Chinese students have chosen the Netherlands because students studying in the Netherlands have various opportunities to apply for scholarships, such as the Orange Tulip Scholarship (OTS). The OTS is offered by higher education institutions, multinationals and government institutions, and managed and promoted by the Nesos[10]. In the meantime, some Dutch higher education institutions have deliberate policies to attract Chinese students. According to the admission officer and the international student advisor that were interviewed

[9] Retrieved from Ministry of Security and Justice official website: https://ind.nl/en/work/Pages/Looking-for-a-job-after-study-promotion-or-research.aspx.
[10] Retrieved from: https://www.studyinholland.nl/scholarships/highlighted-scholarships/orange-tulip-scholarship-programme.

for this research, both of their institutions have been working with an agent in China, who does promotion and marketing in major Chinese cities. The admission office sends staff to China to give presentations about their institution and the programs they offer as well:

> We try to be as an international university and we want to have students from all over the world, so from Asia, South America, North America and Africa and Europe… it is easier to come to the Netherlands if you live in Germany, but for Chinese students, it is quite a big step. So then we think we should go there and present ourselves and maybe we get better chances that they will come as well... if you want to be a truly international program, you need to have students from all over the world. That's why we are going to China and other countries as well (International Student Advisor, male, 36 years old).

In addition, some higher institutions or faculties even promote their programs to Chinese students by creating their official websites in Chinese, such as Wageningen University & Research and Amsterdam Law School[11]. The interviewees confirmed that the number of Chinese students had been increasing in recent years as a result of the deliberate policies.

4.5 Other Factors

The stories that follow address some other factors which have contributed to the Chinese students' decisions to come to a foreign country. For some students, going abroad seemed to be "an easier way" out, compared to continuing study in China or leaving school for work:

> It was very difficult to get into a master's program in my former university [in China] because they are very demanding. And I didn't want to start working after my graduation. That's why I decided to further my study here [in the Netherlands) (Daisy, female, 22 years old).

Some regard living overseas as a great opportunity to explore the world:

> I stayed in China for my bachelor's program. I think applying for the master's is my last chance to study or live in another country. And now I even regret having missed the opportunity or not having the courage to do my bachelor's elsewhere (Felicity, female, 23 years old).

In their study Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) emphasize the importance of gaining a better understanding of "Western culture" for Chinese students through an international education. This motivation is also expressed by the respondents in this research, stating that they do not enter a European higher education institution just for certain qualifications, but to appreciate the multiple cultures in Europe as well.

[11] See http://www.wur.nl/cn.htm and http://als.uva.nl/zhongwen/阿姆斯特丹法学院法学硕士课程.html.

4.6 Concluding Remarks

The factors that have influenced the Chinese students' decisions to further their studies in Dutch higher education institutions included sense of discouragement by the low quality of some institutions in China and disappointment with certain values imposed by the majority in the Chinese society. In fact, there is more to explore concerning the 'values', which will be discussed further in the chapters that follow. Some were frustrated by the high tuition and large number of Chinese students in English-speaking countries such as US and UK, which motivated them to turn to a Dutch institution with relatively lower fees but reasonably high ranking or reputation. For others, better understanding of Western cultures or exploring the world outside China is equally important. Above all, almost all participants clearly recognized the benefits that an education in the Netherlands would bring about, to contribute to their personal growth, especially to give them advantages in career development.

Chapter 5. Dutch / Western Culture – Beyond Adaptation

In this chapter, discussion will be focused on cultural differences that Chinese students encountered in Dutch higher education institutions. Findings from some earlier research indicate that Chinese international students in the US and UK were facing serious problems resulting from cultural shock, and encountering difficulties in sociocultural adjustment (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong 2006; Bodycott 2012). Were the cultural differences experienced by the students in this research also serious or shocking? How did they adapt or adjust to these differences and interact with those coming from different cultural backgrounds? And what factors influenced their adaptation and adjustment? Moreover, did they make efforts to integrate into the Dutch or Western culture?

5.1 Going Dutch

In response to what cultural differences impressed them most while living and studying in the Netherlands, many participants immediately mentioned two characteristics which they identified as typical Dutch. One of them is that "Dutch are too direct", which at times leave some Chinese students feeling uncomfortable or even embarrassed. They mentioned that in the Chinese society, many people have a concept of "face" (Mianzi in Chinese), which means self-respect or self-dignity. Hence Chinese people are used to speaking in an indirect way, so as not to hurt others' faces (or feelings). However, according to the respondents, Dutch always confront people and state everything directly:

> My lecturer replied to my email, saying, "Your English is not so good, so maybe you could follow some English lessons…" I know she wanted to help improve my writing, but I felt so ashamed even when I was just sitting in front of my computer, and I really wanted to dig a hole and crawl in. Since my childhood, I have always been a good student. Nobody ever said anything like "you are not good at this or that" (Nancy, female, 29 years old).

Nevertheless, some other students regard this directness as a Dutch way of helping people. By pointing out people's mistakes or problems directly, they are able to help them improve in certain aspects:

> They speak directly so it is easy and simple to get along with them. As long as you get used to it, you know this is part of their culture and this is actually better, as you won't misunderstand each other. You know they are not impolite and this is their way of trying to help and being nice (Laura, female, 33 years old).

Unlike the first characteristic, which is accepted by some students and rejected by others, the other Dutch way of life, "going Dutch", is appreciated by almost all participants. One interviewee mentioned that students are still not economically independent, thus it is important for them to share costs. This way nobody has to shoulder the burden on their own:

> I think this is also the way of showing respect and it is fair for everyone. Back in China, when I asked my colleagues out for dinner, they just thought I would pay for everyone. Then later I had to stop asking. It is a pity that you have lost the chance of communicating with each other (Jacob, male, 28 years old).

Another student commented that going Dutch also indicates the equality between female and male:

> In China, for example, sometimes boys offer to carry bags for girls, and they take it for granted. However, here girls may think that you look down upon them. So going Dutch is fair for both and it means we are equal (Olivia, female, 25 years old).

Above two accounts contribute to the cultural differences that the Chinese students in this research encountered from their Dutch classmates, colleagues, friends or lecturers. It is interesting to mention that for students who had the experiences of being embarrassed by the Dutch directness, they would be willing to try adapting to it. By extending their "comfort zone", they expect to mix with others in such a multicultural environment. However, the following section will discuss some issues related to interaction with non-Asian students, which seem to be more difficult to adapt or adjust to for most Chinese participants.

5.2 Interaction with Non-Asian Students

Most of the interviewees appeared very satisfied with the friendliness of their international classmates or colleagues, while they also talked about the sharp contrast between the Chinese way of socializing and the "Western way". All students agree that Chinese take pleasure in communicating with each other over the dinner table, while their Western or non-Asian peers prefer going to parties where they drink, chat and dance to music. Most of the respondents

found the "Western party culture" problematic:

> The music was so loud that you couldn't hear what the other was talking about. I don't understand what on earth was interesting about that (Amy, female, 21 years old).

> They like to drink and chat in the cold wind. This is where I couldn't integrate. It (Going to a party) doesn't sound attractive to me at all. It is very likely that I will end up drinking alone. I don't think I can integrate into them like that, and if you don't take the initiative, neither will they (Emily, female, 23 years old).

However challenging it appears to integrate into the party culture, most respondents expressed their strong desire to do so. On the one hand they wished to enjoy some quiet moments just for themselves, while on the other hand, they were afraid that they would no long be part of the international student community if they refused their party invitations constantly. Only two (out of thirty) considered going to parties a valuable opportunity to communicate with other cultural groups. One criticized that too many of their Chinese friends focused their attention on their mobile phones over the dinner table:

> I really hate it when they only look at their phones at table. As a contrast, at parties you have to stay close to others, so you always put your phone away and ask for permission if you want to check it. I really appreciate it as people show mutual respect (Felicity, female, 23 years old).

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

Furthermore, many participants were faced with great challenges in understanding jokes and humor, or having conversations with people of other nationalities. One student was impressed by how non-Asian students chitchat with one another, whereas many of his fellow Chinese students have been making arduous efforts, due to the lack of background knowledge. Another student was frustrated by the fact that his efforts in trying to socialize never paid off:

> I don't think I can handle social life here at all. Dealing with people is different from studying. If you study hard, you will be rewarded immediately. However, my hard work in socialization never paid off. I forced myself to join in parties or events with other nationalities and tried hard to communicate with them. But sometimes they didn't even understand me although I really think my pronunciation was correct. Or at times we just couldn't get each other's humor. There were a lot of occasions when I felt really awkward. I guess it is because of our different cultural backgrounds (Godwin, male, 23 years old).

Some other interviewees also recognized the communication gap between them and the other international students, particularly non-Asian students, however hard they tried to narrow it.

This gap, consequently, contributed to discouraging the Chinese students from integrating with their non-Asian peers, while strengthening their social networks with other Asians or within their own Chinese student community. This finding echoes some research by Ie (2009) Brown (2010) and Bodycott (2012), who stated that fostering social relationships between international students is an extremely difficult endeavor and a complex task as they confront different cultural perspectives and understandings.

Likewise, most of the lecturers interviewed in this research discussed this issue, stating that "Chinese students always stick together" and "don't get involved in other communities", meanwhile pointing out that it is quite normal for certain groups to do so. For instance, "Dutch students stick to their own friend circle too". As far as one international student advisor is concerned, it is a good opportunity for students to interact with others since they are now living in an international community:

> It's so much nicer if you [Chinese students] interact with other nationalities. Because later you are going back to your country, you cope with your country …again. So it's nice to have opportunities here to… that's always the advice I would give to Chinese students: Talk with everybody. Don't be shy. Just talk (International student advisor, male, 36 years old).

5.3 Between Strangers and Friends

Despite the challenges that they are faced with when interacting with their non-Asian peers, the Chinese students tend to think highly of the way the Europeans treat strangers. Some of the interviewees commented that people always smiled at them or said hello when they walked towards them in the streets or when entering a bar, which they found quite impressive. As a contrast, back in China, there was only indifferent encounter between strangers:

> I don't feel there is a big distance between people here. What I feel more is the warmth to strangers. However, in China people don't care about others, even those around them, not to mention strangers. Maybe it is because of the high pressure and fast pace of life. But here I feel very warm that they care and help strangers. This kind of friendliness is not fake (Holly, female, 26 years old).

As a contrast, achieving a close friendship with Dutch classmates or colleagues remained difficult for many respondents, especially for those who have already been working. To clarify, one student emphasized that it occurred also among the local Dutch themselves, thus it was not because they were indifferent to foreigners. As they attached great importance to personal life, this proved to be their way of separating life from work:

> Among Chinese or even Asian colleagues there are lots of opportunities to socialize. However, maybe it is a Dutch culture that people don't want to regard their colleagues as personal friends. Perhaps it is also because they already have their friend circles. It is difficult for Dutch people to rebuild their social circles as well if they move to a new place (Laura, female, 33 years old).

Nevertheless, the respondents recognized the value in such way of life, as it improved the quality of personal life. One student had the experience of working in China, where he found his former colleagues' time management rather problematic:

> Some people [in China] still work after working hours. This has a bad influence on their life, and it is unhealthy. Maybe it is a result of their inefficiency, or perhaps just because of too much competition. And sometimes, they don't leave the office after work only to prove that they work hard. Here people work efficiently within working hours and after that, all the other hours belong to themselves (Laura, female, 33 years old).

5.4 Individualism versus Collectivism

During the interviews, all the participants shared their experiences in encountering cultural differences, while explaining how they coped with the new environment. Another theme that emerged from the research is individualism versus collectivism, which represents some of the participants' general impression rather than personal experiences. One of the respondents claimed that people born into a collectivist society, such as China, are more likely to think about others rather than consider themselves only:

> If we talk to foreigners who are not good at Chinese, we would be more patient and tolerate, much more than them, if they talk to someone who is not good at English. As we are educated to sacrifice ourselves for the benefits of collectivity when necessary, we are used to thinking of others. But for westerners, they don't take the responsibility of the collectivity. I think we should find a balance in between (Edwin, male, 28 years old).

Interestingly, this reflection resonated with some other respondents, one of whom (Leo, male, 24 years old) discussed different behaviors between Dutch and Chinese by adopting Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory. Hofstede's theory explains how people's behaviors are related to certain values, which are affected by a society's culture (Hofstede 2012). He developed a framework with six dimensions along which cultural values could be analyzed: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism versus Collectivism, Masculinity versus Femininity, Long Term versus Short Term Orientation, Indulgence versus Restraint (p. 8).

The remarks above illustrate one out of many differences between individualist and collectivist societies: the "I" consciousness and "We" consciousness (Hofstede 2012, p. 11). Within "Individualism versus Collectivism" dimension, another issue could also be easily identified by Chinese students: "Speaking one's mind is healthy" in an individualist society, while "harmony should always be maintained" in a collectivist one. Such an issue is echoed in another respondent's comments:

> Dutch people always follow their hearts and respect personal characters. If they find your idea is different from theirs, they would speak up, and insist on their own opinions. Sometimes they could sound a bit aggressive. However, Chinese would rather find a balance between the two different opinions, in order to avoid arguments (Grace, female, 25 years old).

To take a glance at how the theory was translated into explanations for certain behaviors, Leo further explained briefly how he understood the other two dimensions. According to him, the Netherlands is a typical small-power-distance country where there is no hierarchy among different people, as well as a feminine society with minimum social role differentiation between the genders. In comparison to such, there is very clear and strong hierarchy in China, a large-power-distance masculine country where, for instance, older people are both respected and feared, and women and men play different social roles.

Hofstede's theory provides a useful tool to understand the different cultural values between the Western countries, the Netherlands as a typical example, and the Eastern countries, such as China, particularly in the dimension of Individualism and Collectivism. Identifying the great gap between the two and adjusting to the differences accordingly facilitate students' integration into this Western society, or at least, prevent them from encountering high levels of cultural shock.

5.5 Cultural Shock and Integration

Apart from the challenges in adapting to the party culture and the communication gap with non-Asian peers, the participants' experiences in the multi-cultural environment were generally positive. None of the interviewees reported any case of social isolation or high level of cultural shock. For almost all of them, those cultural differences did not exert a powerful influence over their lives, neither was there an urgent need for them to integrate into the international community.

One respondent mentioned that she would prefer two-way integration, in which Chinese students and other international students integrate with one another. She also emphasized the significance of mutual respect, which outweighs the importance of adjusting or adapting to other cultures. Another student pointed out that students came to a foreign country when they were already adults, with different worldviews already formed. They do not consider it possible to eliminate the cultural barriers, nor is it meaningful to imitate others' lifestyle.

As all participants were born after the 1980s, most of them tend to believe that they grew up in a society which had already been influenced by European culture. According to one student, they already had a good understanding of the cultural differences, as a result of exposure to the Western culture. More importantly, it was because of those differences that one's world or worldview had been expanded, in a positive way.

> There are a lot of things in this world that I cannot know. If I saw something unexpected happen, I would tell myself everything happens for a reason. I would try to discover how and why they did so. By exploring the unknown, my world will be expanded. It is a kind of natural expansion, one without shock (Jacob, male, 28 years old).

5.6 Concluding Remarks

From these findings, it can be concluded that the participants in this research did not experience severe difficulties in adjusting and adapting culturally to their new environment, although they did encounter cultural differences from other nationalities, particularly non-Asian peers. None of them reported any serious reaction resulting from those experiences. As they came from an increasingly globalized society, they were exposed to different cultures while growing up, which explained their awareness of the necessary changes and inevitable problems encountered in living in a foreign country. As a matter of fact, some of the differences in lifestyles, such as "going Dutch" and "balancing work and personal life", were highly appreciated and adapted to instead of being regarded as problems. As for those that remained challenging to Chinese students, such as party culture and communication gap, mutual understanding and respect was considered more important than integration. Besides, a two-way integration, Chinese students and others integrating into each other and adapting to each other's cultures, appeared possible and feasible since the world itself is indeed, multi-cultural. Finally, although differences between Western and Eastern values do exist, for instance, the issues discussed about Individualism and Collectivism, exploring and

experiencing those differences has become a journey to discover the world, one to expand the students' own world, and "one without shock".

Chapter 6. Navigating Pedagogy Overseas

Most students in this research confirmed that their previous education in China, whether in high schools or higher institutions, were still exam-oriented. Moreover, they noted that most of their teachers adopted the teacher-centered pedagogy. Despite the fact that the government was making great efforts to promote educational reforms and student-centered pedagogy, teachers still played a dominant role and controlled the involvement of students in the classrooms, while students learned knowledge passively and had to do an enormous amount of work to prepare for the examinations. However, there were some cases where students had the experiences of learning with a student-centered approach, either because they were following some international courses taught by Western teachers, or because their teachers had received Western education and were initiating different teaching approaches. Moufahim and Lim (2015) found out that the Chinese students, who studied at a British university's campus located in China, appeared to perceive that Western knowledge and pedagogy were superior over the Chinese system. In comparison to such perception, the participants in this research shared different viewpoints and provided important insights based on their encounters within both Chinese and Dutch contexts.

6.1 Similarities

The participants claimed that, against their expectation, they did not find the teaching style in their higher institutions extremely different from that of their former teachers in China, or rather, they identified quite some similarities. In general, they had lectures where lecturers gave presentations and tutorials which were organized by tutors for discussion, group work, case studies and doing exercises. In terms of giving lectures, there were no significant differences between the Chinese lecturers and those in the Netherlands:

> I think both in China and here [in the Netherlands], there are good lecturers and poor ones. The good ones can give interesting presentations, which makes it easy for us to grasp the knowledge. The poor ones just read everything on their slides, and you

> won't learn anything from them. I don't agree that lecturers here are all better than those in China (Nelson, male, 26 years old).

However, in contrast with their previous experiences in the Chinese education system, the present experience appeared more challenging because it demanded intense concentration and more efforts in a relatively shorter period of time. For instance, more reading was required and all courses proved rather intensive, as generally it took only two months, instead of four in China, to finish one course, including lectures, assignments, presentations and even final examinations or papers.

Furthermore, as there is also a strong element of student-centered approach in the Dutch learning environment, a relaxed and informal style of teaching and learning is greatly encouraged. Therefore, apart from lectures, there is a great emphasis on the interaction between teachers and students, participation in discussions and teamwork spirit. Those were where most participants met their challenges as a consequence of exam-oriented and teacher-centered education. The following section explores such challenges in details.

6.2 Differences and Difficulties / Challenges

Having been educated in an exam-oriented education system and been accustomed to the teacher-centered pedagogy, most of the Chinese students in this research encountered various difficulties and challenges when undertaking education abroad for the first time. Only few students did not find it different or challenging since they had experiences with Western teachers or teachers with Western education background. The challenges discussed by the respondents are divided into several themes as following: classroom participation, group work and presentation, language barrier, examination and assessment, practical skills and habits versus critical thinking and creativity, and the role of teachers.

6.2.1 Classroom Participation

When asked about what activities they had in a regular class and what challenges they encountered, some students' immediate response was classroom discussion and their limited participation. According to them, there were always heated discussions in the lectures or tutorials, in which 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 or respond to questions actively. Some students mentioned that being silent was a way of showing respect to teachers in Chinese classrooms:

> As we respected teachers, we wouldn't interrupt teachers in class. If we didn't understand something, we would rather ask teachers or classmates after class. Also we regarded effectiveness in class as very important. We think if we challenged teachers, we would slow down the teaching process and teachers wouldn't be able to finish their planned lessons (Henry, male, 26 years old).

The comments above explained why most Chinese students had a tendency not to question the lecturers or the contents that they discussed in class. However, for some other participants, the questions raised by other international peers 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 contents. I think our time has been wasted (Bella, female, 22 years old).

As an alternative, the students preferred to discuss among themselves or converse with lecturers privately after class or through emails.

Some studies about Chinese learners' silence in the classroom related this model to obedience and lack of critical thinking hence Chinese students are stereotyped as passive learners (Hu 2002; Liu 2002). For most of the participants in this research, remaining silent, not speaking up or raising questions did not equal to being reluctant to study or being passive learners. However, when participation is highly encouraged and expected, silence could be regarded as abnormal:

> Even the other students know that we don't speak up much or interact with them 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 (Justin, female, 23 years old).

Furthermore, the respondents did not agree that being silent equaled to uncritical thinking in their learning. Some explained that they would rather speak up after careful thinking than raise a random question as there were about 200 students in one large class and they did not want to take up everyone's time. This sentiment also reflected their anxiety or fear of being laughed at or criticized by others. One student stated that she enjoyed thinking and listening, and was not afraid of speaking up, but sometimes just after a little hesitation, she would lose her opportunity to express her opinion:

> I just hesitated for one short moment, not even a second. Then other students already started speaking, one after another. I never got a chance [to speak] although I believe some of my ideas were really good (Emily, female, 23 years old).

One lecturer interviewee also responded to this issue, commenting that being unable to express one's opinion actively is more a matter of personality rather than a lack of critical thinking:

> So there were a few people who were shy, so they just wouldn't say their opinion, and that can be seen as not being critical enough very often. But I had a feeling it was more being, a bit more introvert, not daring to, than not really thinking…I think the thoughts were there but they were just not outspoken (Lecturer, female, 35 years old).

Another lecturer also mentioned that "it [not speaking out] hampers them [Chinese students] in their own sort of intellectual development, because we live in a system where that is very much encouraged if you try to articulate in a very good way". However, he further clarified that those who remain silent in classrooms should not be regarded as underqualified students:

> …but again to qualify that, at the end of the day, the most important would be the papers they write. That happens to me a lot, that people who speak up a lot in class, are not necessarily the best students. You can have really silent students, who turn out to be extremely smart. If I would advertise for PhD, I would want to have the second students of course (Lecturer, male, 49 years old).

Although it remained challenging for the students to play an active role in class, they identified the benefits in classroom participation. Some considered it an effective method to interact with other classmates, and to improve their communication skills. Therefore, many of them were determined to overcome their fears and persuaded themselves not to be scared of making mistakes. This is reflected by the following statement:

> I was also afraid of raising stupid questions, but I knew I had to speak up, so that others would correct me if I was wrong. The more I spoke, the braver I was. Then I was able to join in more and more discussions. That's also how I integrated into my classmates' circle. For our Chinese students, it is very important to take that first step. It takes a lot of courage (Calvin, male, 21 years old).

6.2.2 Group Work and Presentation

Many participants regarded working in groups and doing assignment with peers as beneficial to their learning and a useful method to cultivate the capacity of teamwork. They understood that a spirit of teamwork is highly appreciated, as well as the skills to communicate and cooperate with others. For most of them, group work was not something unique in Western education, as it was also applied in their previous education in China. However, a few of them mentioned that in many occasions back in China, those who were academically better did most of the work, and that very often, there were free riders in the group. Due to a lack of experiences, for some students, cooperating more intensively with international peers in the new learning environment engendered discomfort or even depression, particularly at the

beginning of their study:

> I didn't have enough experiences 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, "What can I do for you? 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 years old).

Some interviewees 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 discussion, which would make a worthwhile contribution to their personal development. Nevertheless, a few students still took great pains to communicate with their peers as a result of different cultural backgrounds or because of language barriers:

> 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 in communicating. We couldn't give feedback, or explain things clearly to each other. Then we just couldn't proceed. Sometimes I felt we were not speaking the same English (Godwin, male, 23 years old).

One student claimed that despite all the values of teamwork, working in groups did jeopardize her chance of presentation. She further explained that as their performance in class was evaluated as a group, they always selected the best student to present on behalf of the group:

> I know I should practice more. But I would feel guilty if I didn't do well in presentation and my group got a low score because of me. So I just decided not to. It was my own mistake because I didn't practice before I came here (Felicity, female, 23 years old).

Such findings were echoed in Wu's research (2015), where the Chinese students at British universities had a strong tendency to depend on the stronger members in the group, due to the influence of their previous experience with group learning.

6.2.3 Language Barrier

Furthermore, students identified their lack of proficiency in English as a barrier. Although it was not decisive in their choices, this barrier did undermine their confidence in participating in discussions, interacting with other intentional students and presenting themselves. Some respondents mentioned that, back in China, they used to be so confident in their English that they were always believed to be among the best English learners. However, the reality in the Netherlands was extremely shocking when they encountered various problems resulted from their English level:

> I couldn't understand the lectures in class. There were so many new words in the readings. I never realized my English was so poor. It was such a painful experience in the first three months that I cried so many times. I almost collapsed because of such

pain (Nancy, female, 29 years old).

A few respondents commented that their ability to speak and write in English was a result of the exam-oriented teacher-centered education and the standardized tests in the Chinese system. In their previous English classes back in China, the teachers explained the contents in textbooks and lectured on the topics. Such dominant way of teaching limited their opportunity to practice speaking appropriately, not to mention the ability to argue and debate in English. In addition, as they learned to write essays following the standards set for the examinations, their language skills proved to be relatively poor in comparison to other international students.

Furthermore, coming from different cultural backgrounds engendered different ways of thinking and expressing, which, some students believed, also contributed to their miscommunication with other nationalities. Such comment was reflected in one student's response:

> I believe my pronunciation was really good and accurate, but they [other international students] couldn't understand me. Later on, I realized there was great difference between our ways of thinking. Though they could recognize the English words when I spoke, they still didn't understand (Keith, male, 24 years old).

Nevertheless, the respondents were generally very positive about improving their English. The majority believed that this barrier was only a temporary disadvantage, and that language skills could be cultivated through hard work and practice.

6.2.4 Examination and Assessment

As discussed in the previous chapters, Chinese education system has always been exam-oriented and the standardized test system has been criticized in recent years. However, according to a few respondents, some of the examinations in the Dutch higher education institutions were similar to the Chinese ones, which strictly required students to master the knowledge, particularly for those bachelor students. To achieve good performance in such exams, students maintained the same learning style as they used to:

> Because of the education I had in China, I learned to take notes in class, and to identify the important points from the lectures. Then I had a good understanding of the knowledge. Sometimes I also needed to memorize a lot, and then did really well in exams. This way I also felt I was really learning a lot (Leona, female, 25 years old).

Instead of criticizing, these students considered the exam-oriented Chinese education helpful and effective in preparing them with sufficient skills. Nevertheless, in most cases, respondents indicated that the present exam requirements and assessment standards were different and

more challenging. In their previous education in China, teachers always pointed out the important contents that were most likely to be tested, and students prepared for the exams mostly through memorization and repetition. In comparison, in the Dutch context, students' own understanding of the contents was required as well as the application of knowledge to practice. Due to a lack of such experience, this was rather difficult for some students, particularly when assessment standard provided by teachers appeared to be vague:

> Memorization and cramming don't work here. I think an integration of everything you have 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 was really lost, not knowing whether I did well or not. I never had this feeling before. I completely had no confidence (Felicity, female, 23 years old).

One lecturer interviewed in this research responded to this issue: when there were a lot of open questions, Chinese students had a tendency to fail their exams. The interviewee further clarified that this occurred not only to Chinese students, though there were "a bit more of them", but also very often to other students coming from outside Europe:

> I do find that they do have difficulty in coming up with their own examples, so sometimes in the test … I literally read my lecture back, word by word. So what I want during the exam, I would prefer their own examples, based on the knowledge they got during the course, but they just have a tendency to repeat what was told during the lecture… they are so scared before the exam that they literally memorize everything, but they have difficulty in application, maybe they are taking a safe road, they think "ok this example was given during the lecture, so I am safe, this is definitely correct", and they don't take the risks of thinking of something new (Lecturer, female, 30 years old).

These comments suggest that the differences in assessment criteria have presented a challenge for both students and teachers, which sometimes provokes anxiety and inconfidence in students. Furthermore, the lecturer also pointed out that students need some time to get used to the Dutch testing system because of the open questions, and that "this is not really Chinese specific", but "in general everybody outside Europe".

In addition, whether Chinese students are capable of meeting the new criteria leads to another discussion about whether they lack creativity and critical thinking, as a consequence of Chinese exam-oriented education. In the following section, this will be investigated through the lenses of both Chinese students and the lecturers who have had sufficient experiences in teaching and interacting with Chinese students.

6.2.5 Practical Skills & Habits versus Critical Thinking & Creativity

Since both Chinese and Dutch education systems attach great importance to the examinations, participants actually appreciated that the Chinese education empowered them with certain useful learning skills, such as summarizing and reproducing the knowledge in an effective way. Although being criticized, such skills proved to be very helpful for students to achieve satisfactory performances in examinations. Some participants also recognized the fact that Chinese education fostered good learning habits. As one student reflected:

> Chinese students are not lazy. Unlike some other international students, when we have an assignment, most of us don't put it off. We plan and organize our things well, so we can always finish our tasks before the deadlines (Justin, female, 23 years old).

Taking an initiative in study, always planning, being well-organized, and hardly procrastinating were perceived by the students as advantages over their international peers, for which the participants have been grateful to the Chinese education. One student also attributed her proficiency in English speaking and writing skills to the education she received in high school:

> I really appreciate my high school education. My teacher was really strict and we had to listen to tapes, imitate the pronunciation and intonation and recite a lot. I know many people are critical about this way of teaching and learning a language, but as far as I can see, this is one of the best ways, since we don't have the English-speaking environment (Maggie, female, 24 years old).

One lecturer also pointed out such aspects as advantages of students with a background of Chinese education, which she thought highly of and really appreciated:

> Actually their [Chinese students] factual knowledge, I feel is higher than average Western students…they are very motivated and…they are so structured. They are always on the computer taking a lot of notes, structuring everything … I've seen once the notes of one of my students, I was amazed…and they are very attentive to detail (Lecturer, female, 30 years old).

Nevertheless, many students confirmed that there had been negative influences on their creativity and the ability to think critically, and that the classroom pedagogy and disciplines had limited their ways of thinking and discouraged their curiosity. As Chinese education encourages listening attentively and memorizing knowledge, and students are accustomed to following the teachers without questioning or interaction, gradually not only their voices, but their curiosity has been silenced as well. One interviewee recalled his experience from primary school to university:

> I was very active and curious when I was in primary school. Then in junior high I hardly asked questions. After that, in my senior high classes, the only thing I did was to take notes. I believe we were born with the nature of being curious, both Chinese and foreign children. But Chinese children become more and more silent. This is a long-term process. Years and years of education has put a limit on our thinking.

> "Rome was not built in a day" (Olivia, female, 25 years old).

Another student echoed such view by stating that her mind was so dependent on others that she could not think on her own, not to mention think critically. She provided a description on how she was discouraged by her mother, who she held accountable for her lack of creative thinking:

> Very often when I had questions, my mom would tell me not to think about them, because I was too young to understand. She told me just to memorize and follow the answers so that I could pass the tests. Then I never thought, never questioned. That was the education I had, teaching to the test (Keith, male, 24 years old).

As a sharp contrast, the education in the Dutch higher institutions received positive comments and was perceived as better and more desirable, in terms of developing students' creativity and their potential in critical thinking. Many agreed that on average, Chinese students were capable of learning from others and developing the existing ideas, while being relatively weak in creating new ones. One participant summarized the characteristics of the two education 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 analyze and solve problems, as well as to think independently (Laura, female, 33 years old).

In Chinese education, on the one hand, students absorb information passively from teachers, who are regarded as authority of knowledge. On the other hand, even when unwilling to, they receive numerous suggestions and instructions from family members, especially parents, another form of absolute authority. Consequently, students become increasingly dependent on the authorities even in the process of decision making, which jeopardizes their ability to think independently. Worse still, such kind of education has been existing throughout the Chinese society and has been so detrimental to students' minds that many of them have great difficulty even in identifying what they are really interested in:

> 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 then they realize what they've been fighting for is not something they really like (Felicity, female, 23 years old).

> Chinese education does not educate students to find out what they really like…Parents, or even others, let's say, the society sets a life path for you, and then you just follow… but here [in the Netherlands], everyone knows and chooses what they like, and nobody interferes (Nancy, female, 29 years old).

On the contrary, according to the respondents, the Dutch education cultivates students' minds to be creative and analytical, and encourages independent, critical and divergent thinking. Under such an education, students have a strong desire for knowledge, and an aspiration to explore the unknown within their own fields of interest.

One lecturer interviewed in this research responded to this issue:

> I heard from my colleagues that it's always kind of difficult to find people who want to supervise Chinese students, because they never really know what to do, or they don't really have very good background about doing research (Lecturer, male, 29 years old).

He further explained that although he did not have problems with Chinese students, not knowing what to do could be a problem for those doing a master's, since it was not the teachers' responsibility to tell students what they should do. However, as this lecturer has had some experiences of working with Chinese students, in order to resolve the problem, he tries "to push them a little bit into a certain direction and then they can find what they think is interesting". Moreover, he pointed out that "if you [lecturers] are too Dutch and don't really understand what's going on [with Chinese students] culturally, then it's more difficult perhaps".

Another lecturer emphasized that the issues of creativity and critical thinking are related to the "discrepancy" between the Dutch / European / Western European education system and the Chinese system, and that such issues can actually be tackled:

> I can't support the statement with actual numbers, but that's an impression I have…Chinese students adjust rapidly. They are certainly not among the worst students. They are all over the place, ranging from excellent students to poor students…I don't have the impression, that Chinese students require more assistance. And I don't have the impressions that, distribution of grades differs significantly from distribution of grades of other students (Lecturer, male, 41 years old).

In line with such comments, two more lecturers also confirmed that "critical thinking can be learned… thinking (critically) in a foreign language is not an easy task to accomplish that may take several years to develop" (lecturer, male, 38 years old), and "they [Chinese students] change very rapidly" (lecturer, female, 30 years old). More interestingly, two other lecturers simply did not regard a lack of critical thinking or creativity as a problem for Chinese students:

> That is not how I have experienced Chinese students at all (Lecturer, female, age unknown).

> I am not sure it is that much worse than for the non-Chinese students, though, and again could just be a result of language barriers (Lecturer, female, 29 years old).

Those remarks hopefully will inspire the Chinese students' confidence in themselves. After all, they are now in a different system aiming for an education. Hence they should not confine themselves to the stereotypes, as there are always possibilities and opportunities for them to acquire a new skill such as critical thinking.

6.2.6 Role of Teachers

The above discussion gives rise to the last theme concerning the pedagogical differences in Chinese and Dutch education: the role of teachers. Although the styles of giving lectures are quite similar, teachers in China have a tendency to provide more guidance and support, while those in the Netherlands, prefer to leave students more freedom and room for independent thinking. As there is a dramatic shift on the role of teachers in the new educational context, Chinese students would have to adjust from being authority-dependent to individual learning. Such a process might be tedious and sometimes unexpected and confusing for the newcomers, during which special efforts are required. As one student remarked:

> 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 teachers don't have to teach, and you just learn by yourself (Bella, female, 22 years old).

Such comments indicate that Chinese students favor a more supportive relationship with teachers and expect more commitment from them, hence it would be beneficial for them if teachers could adjust to their needs accordingly. Even "a little push into a certain direction" would have been valuable and advantageous in empowering students and increasing their chances of success or effectiveness.

6.3 Concluding Remarks

Most Chinese students in this research do not consider the education they have received in the Netherlands as superior over the Chinese system. Some pointed out that, unlike what they perceived before coming to the Netherlands, the Dutch system is not necessarily higher quality. Although the lengths of stay and the programs they are studying vary, they have recognized different advantages that the two systems have offered. Besides, some claimed

that the teaching style in their Dutch education is similar to that in China. However, many students have encountered various differences and challenges, thus they have been striving to adapt. For instance, active participation, group work, presentation and a free style of interaction in classrooms are greatly encouraged in the Dutch system, which have posed challenges for Chinese students, due to lack of experiences, lack of proficiency or confidence in English, as well as their different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, as the role of teachers, the assessment criteria and the skills they have achieved from Chinese system are all significantly different, the participants also struggled to meet the new standards and satisfy the requirements. Such pedagogical differences are influential on their learning experiences. Hence almost all participants have made great efforts to adapt to the new learning environment. However, since teaching and learning are two central acts in pedagogy (Alexander 2001), it is equally essential for educators to adjust their ways of teaching and commitment to students, in pursuance of better catering to students' needs.

Chapter 7. Negotiating Chinese Identity in Western Civilization

Having grown up and studied in their home country for more than 12 years, presently the participants have been living and studying or working in the Netherlands for various lengths of time, ranging from three months up to six years. As they have encountered various cultural and pedagogical differences and challenges in their new learning and living environment, this chapter will focus on the impacts of these experiences on their identity. Are there differences between how they perceived China and the West before and their perceptions now? Have they ever come into contact with issues related to prejudice and discrimination? What do they think are the perceptions of the other nationalities, especially the "Westerners" on Chinese? How do these perceptions influence their sense of belonging and their own views on being Chinese? In addition, when negotiating with the Western surroundings, the multicultural society, how would they define themselves and, how do the conflicting cultures eventually impact on their values? The following sections will provide an exploration into these questions.

7.1 "Big China" VS "Big Europe"

When enquired about their perceptions of China and Western society, one participant provided important insights into this theme. During his several years of experiences both in China and the Netherlands, he got to know a lot of Chinese students studying overseas. Among them, quite a few students shared extreme opinions on Chinese and Western society and culture, which he then categorized into two groups:

> "Big Europe": this group of students over deprecates their own worth and they believe that everything is better in the Western world than in China. Even some Chinese girls would rather get a Western boyfriend. "Big China": this is a group of chauvinistic Chinese students who think that China is the best, while Europe is just a big countryside with nothing exciting (Henry, male, 26 years old).

Interestingly, two out of thirty student interviewees belong to the "Big China" group, while none of them could be included in the "Big Europe" category. The students who adhered to

the “Big China” vision commented that:

> There are neither tall buildings, nor many luxurious cars. Shops close so early every day, which is not a good sign of economy. Europe is really like a big countryside, and there is no sign of a metropolis. You know there is a place called Sky Lounge near the center, but there are only 11 floors on that building. Well, we have 80 floors for the sky lounge in Beijing (Felicity, female, 23 years old).

> I do think I belong to the “Big China” group. Everything is better in China. Whenever there is good news about China on the internet, you can see the comments below, like “China has been developing so fast in the recent years, why don’t they think about their citizens? Do they have enough food for their kids?” …you can tell that they are actually really jealous (Justin, female, 23 years old).

In comparison to the “Big China” group, most students decided to adopt a neutral position. Since they have enjoyed considerable advantages that China and Europe have to offer, they gradually learned to appreciate both. They maintained that Chinese economy is booming, along with the rapid development of infrastructure, science and technology, innovation as well as increasing number of patents. Some second-class Chinese cities nowadays are as modern as some European capitals. Besides, China is also renowned for its long history and rich culture, together with plentiful delicious food. On the other hand, Europe provides a very good example of development: good environment, better infrastructure, high productivity and good social welfare. People in general are happier and more open-minded, and they respect each other, enjoy more freedom of speech, democracy and inclusiveness of the society. The following comments of a student illustrate these sentiments:

> At the very beginning, when I first came abroad, I thought everything was better here [in Europe]. Then two or three years later, I thought things were so much better in China and it was a really advanced country. However, now I’ve become more critical. I understand that things are not always black or white (Martin, male, 26 years old).

The above findings are, to a certain extent, in line with Mahbubani’s discussion in his book *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (2009): with the rise of Eastern powers such as China, those who “live outside the West” no longer believe in and begin to question the “inherent” superiority of Western civilization (p. 129).

7.2 Sense of Pride

When asked about their viewpoints on China and how they perceive being Chinese, most students were placed in a dilemma. A few students are proud of China because of the rapid progress the country has made in economy over the past decades. As commented by one participant:

> European economy has been declining, especially in recent years. They are probably still proud of themselves and have been resting on their laurels. But actually nothing compares to China now. I am proud of being Chinese (Keith, male, 24 years old).

Another student also mentioned that she used to be very critical about China's economic growth, as its high-speed development had resulted in enormous problems. However, having been living and studying overseas for more than six years, she reflected on what China had achieved:

> Now I realize that no country like China could have made such remarkable progress in such a short time. I don't feel ashamed of our problems since we have raised one fourth of the world's population. We have different history and culture so our system works differently. We don't deserve to be judged with others' different values (Laura, female, 33 years old).

Some other respondents did not take pride in China's national power, instead, they were proud of Chinese culture and history, and would be honored to call themselves Chinese:

> I am proud of our culture. It emphasizes balance and inclusiveness, as well as moral values. For instance, "Troubled, improve yourself; valued, improve the world." It means to refine one's personal virtue when in poverty, but to help save the world when in success. This kind of culture is valuable and nutritious, worth studying and spreading (Jacob, male, 28 years old).

Nevertheless, some students exhibited strong disapproval of such proudness, claiming "whether the country is good or not doesn't have much to do with whether a person is good" (Henry, male, 26 years old), or "people shouldn't be proud of where they are from, but of who they are" (Isabel, female, 21 years old), or "economy is not something I am proud of, but I will be proud if for example, they legalize gay marriage" (Alan, male, 18 years old).

Furthermore, they presented a variety of issues concerning the natural environment and the Chinese society, which they found rather problematic. For instance, the serious pollution, caused by the rapid growth of economy, has been a major challenge facing China. Due to the large population, there has been fierce competition in education and labor markets, as well as other sectors or resources. Such was believed to have contributed to people's "eagerness for instant success and seeking quick profits" (Martin, male, 26 years old). Besides, there has been a high degree of inequality in most aspects of life in China, according to one respondent, so that "there is no rule and you always have to know someone to get things done" (Frank, male, 23 years old). Under such circumstances, "the rich and the governmental officials are the most benefited but they just don't know how to educate their children" (Leona, female, 25 years old).

Also as a result of uneven distribution of educational resources, some students indicated that a certain part of the Chinese population are undereducated, which lead to very bad behaviors. They further demonstrated this point with examples such as disrespecting waiters or flight attendants, destroying tourist sites by engraving names. And worse still, crimes including "selling poisonous baby milk powder" and "child trafficking" are not uncommon in China. One student pointed out that some people "pursue their own benefits by sacrificing others", which resulted in the decrease of mutual trust among people (Maggie, female, 24 years old).

Concerning the issue of "pride" among Chinese students, one lecturer, with his experiences of teaching Chinese students both in the Netherlands and in China, commented:

> Chinese education system is highly problematic…It's too patriotic, particularly the past decade or so… The Chinese education is becoming increasingly nationalized (Lecturer, male, 49 years old).

Such remarks are in line with Wang's (2008) research, which discussed the successful promotion of patriotic education by the Chinese central government starting from the 1990s. However, the participants in this research do not demonstrate a strong characteristic of nationalism, rather, they have been more critical when judging their own country. As commented by one respondent:

> The canons and beliefs of international Chinese students have been changing…as the new generation has grown up under the influence of different cultures, not only Chinese, but also Japanese, Korean, and European cultures. They don't tag themselves as proud Chinese (Henry, male, 26 years old).

The lecturer also indicated that China is so much more open towards the global influences nowadays, regional influences mainly, and the young generation also get so much other information from other places, that "they become more and more savvy, and more and more become aware of the limitations".

7.3 Prejudice and Discrimination

In response to whether they have encountered any prejudice or discrimination, many students mentioned various questions they were asked very often by their international peers and even professors. The most common questions include whether they eat dogs, cats or insects, their opinions about the Cultural Revolution, the internet censorship, the block of Facebook and

Google, as well as the serious levels of pollution in China. One respondent shared his experience as following:

> About eating dogs, they take it personal, especially those who have dogs. They think it is a really bad thing to do that. People asked me, "Do Chinese eat dogs?" Even after I explained we don't, they still think so, and I have to explain that we don't, my family don't and my friends don't. Actually in China many people are also taking actions against eating dogs. But they think you [Chinese] are all the same. You feel this is prejudice and discrimination (Henry, male, 26 years old).

However, he further explained that he believed most people are just being curious rather than malicious. If that is the case, he suggested, students should not take those questions personal or offensive:

> I also asked my three Indian classmates directly about Maoist Communist Centre of India, pollution of the Ganges and uneven distribution of education resources in their country. They didn't take these offensive. I asked them because they grew up there and know better. It's nothing personal. They also asked me about corruption and I told them it was worse in China than in India (Henry, male, 26 years old).

Another student also commented that living in a completely new environment, sometimes students are too concerned and sensitive so that they exaggerate such problems. It is important for them to understand that most people mean no harm and are just eager to hear about different perspectives from insiders. He further suggested that "if it is a personal attack, or an insult, we don't have to tolerate. We must fight back, and protect our own rights" (Martin, male, 26 years old).

Furthermore, some students claimed that they have actually experienced discrimination and prejudice in their daily life outside of the campus:

> Once I walked out of IKEA with my shopping bags. One car was passing by and someone reached out his head out of the window, shouting "Get out of the Netherlands" (Godwin, male, 23 years old).

> Most people here are very friendly, but I met a group of people in a big shopping mall and one of them walked towards me and said "stupid Chinese" …I don't know which country he is from but I am sure he is a Westerner. In fact, many Dutch people are friendly and take care of me… but still, some people are very unfriendly to China. It happens everywhere. Sometimes Chinese are unfriendly to other nationalities as well (Amy, female, 21 years old).

One student shared his insights into the reasons why Chinese students received such negative treatment, by taking the case of Chinese in Australia as an example:

> There is a growing number of Chinese going to Australia. It is said that they are turning the English-speaking country into a Chinese-speaking one. I've heard about lots of incidences such as Chinese being attacked by Australian locals. I am thinking

> about where this prejudice came from…it is because of us, too many Chinese, that the housing price has been increasing, and average amount of resources in their country has been decreasing (Amy, female, 21 years old).

A few students also attributed the prejudice against Chinese to the large number of ill-behaved Chinese tourists, who travelled around the world and damaged the reputation of their country. One girl also mentioned the incidence that happened in the street, where some people threw baby milk powder onto a Chinese person:

> After that I no longer dared to buy milk powder, even when my cousin asked me for help. This is real discrimination against Chinese. But I think it's the Chinese that are to blame. They bought so much milk powder that the local people couldn't get enough powder for their babies. I think this is a matter of disrespect. They deserve the hatred from the locals (Felicity, female, 23 years old).

In addition, some students illustrated with their experiences how biased and close-minded some Westerners could be in their perceptions of "non-Western" countries like China. One respondent mentioned his encounter with a German middle-aged man on a train:

> I wanted to communicate with him because I thought we could exchange some information about each other's country. Then he asked me, "Are Chinese below the age of 18 not allowed to read newspapers?" I was really shocked. I can't imagine where this prejudice came from…but I am sure it was brought by the Western media (Jacob, male, 28 years old).

According to Jacob, most prejudice that he has witnessed resulted from the biased reports from Western media. He explained that plenty of articles he read from the media were not written from a neutral perspective. Instead, "after you read these articles, you could become very angry at the Chinese government." Another student expressed similar sentiments:

> The West thinks we are barbarians, and that we are a backward country with dictatorship. I am not saying that Western society is not good. I think after their control over the world for several hundred years, they were brought to a position with a blind acceptance of their superiority (Edwin, male, 28 years old).

The findings echoed Mahbubani's (2009) comments on this issue: the West has become biased and close-minded in their perceptions of "non-Western" countries, including China. One student expressed his opinion towards those misconceptions:

> I don't blame them because there is no reason for me to ask someone who lives outside China to know everything about China… not much sufficient information about China has been disseminated from a fair, unbiased and objective perspective in the media… I feel it an obligation and responsibility for international Chinese students to be ambassadors of China, to reveal the hidden truths and facilitate the world's understanding of the real China (Jacob, male, 28 years old).

Notwithstanding that the participants have been subject to inequitable treatment in different

aspects due to their status as Chinese, they expressed their understanding towards those unequal treatments to a great extent.

7.4 Seeking Identities and Belonging

In response to how overseas experiences influenced their perceptions on identity, the Chinese students discussed their constant movement of seeking identities and belonging. Interestingly, students with different lengths of stay in the Netherlands presented different storylines. Hence this section will investigate their identity negotiation under three categories: I) those who started their study in 2016 and had about three months' experiences; II) those who have been studying for more than a year; III) and those who already finished study and have been working ever since, or resumed their study after working for some time in the Netherlands.

7.4.1 Category I: Home, Seeing the World, Independence

When talking about their experiences, most students in this group expressed positive sentiments towards their three months' life and study in the Netherlands. Meanwhile, they emphasized the importance of their home and family, pointing out that the place where their parents are gives them a sense of belonging, no matter how much they loved living overseas:

> I love the living and working environment here. But I miss home very much. Sometimes I saw my parents and our dog over a video call, and I felt that it was what home was supposed to be like: being together with my family (Davy, male, 22 years old).

Another student attached intense emotions to her family as well:

> I will surely go home after graduation. My father's and my grandfather's generations all lived in my hometown. Nobody left that place their whole life. If I were the first one in my family to leave it, I would be very very sad (Daisy, female, 22 years old).

For these young students, coming to the Netherlands has provided them an opportunity to experience a different world, or to see the world from different angles:

> I saw and experienced more than I used to. For example, I used to think everything is more advanced here than in China, but to be honest, now I know it's not true. This is also part of my personal growth, and I feel lucky about it (Cathy, female, 27 years old).

Furthermore, how the education would benefit them does not carry much weight, while what matters is the courage to step out of their "comfort zone":

> I am proud of and satisfied with myself because I am brave enough to face many things now. I am happy that I took my first step bravely [to come to the Netherlands] (Alan, male, 18 years old).

Such an aspect is also one of the important qualities that most of the lecturers interviewed in this research thought highly of. One lecturer's response well illustrates their general sentiments towards their Chinese students:

> My impression on Chinese students (both in the NL and the U.S.) is that they are on average excellent, hard-working students and I enjoy working with them. They step out of their comfort zone (China) and expose themselves to risk and challenge. They not only learn a subject, but also a Western culture, and at least one foreign language during the course of their study. All this on top while becoming adults, and having to organize alone life in a foreign place. All this is a lot more challenging than just enrolling into a university in your own country (Lecturer, male, 38 years old).

Another theme that emerged from their responses is their positioning of themselves as someone new: how the international experiences have changed them into someone with more confidence and becoming more independent. As commented by Emily, due to China's One-Child Policy, she is the only child in her family, thus she used to depend on her parents whenever she had problems in China:

> But now I am more independent, and more self-confident. I am not afraid of anything… anything dangerous, or anything new. I used to worry a lot but now I know I can handle everything by myself (Emily, female, 23 years old).

In China it is very common for parents to over protect their children, especially for those who have only one child. Since most of the interviewees come from one-child families, becoming independent carries great significance to them and represents their desire of who they want to become.

7.4.2 Category II: Values, Chinese Identity, Surviving the World

Most of the participants in this group indicated that the experience of studying in the Netherlands and living independently gave them an opportunity to re-invent who they are. What they valued greatly before coming abroad have changed into something else:

> I used to value good grades, and wanted to get into a better university in the US or UK. But now I care about whether I am happy, and my family is the most important (Isabel, female, 21 years old).

> When I was in high school, I dreamed about having a big house and a luxurious car. Now I feel I was too superficial. Maybe because now I see people's lifestyle here, I want to have a life with a slower pace, and I attach more importance to family (Frank, male, 23 years old).

Frank explained that the life path "school-job-marriage-children" appeared to be a standard of the society for everyone to follow. And worse still, many people judge and interfere others with such standard. He further illustrated his point by sharing his experience of being interfered by his relatives:

> They tried to prevent me from coming abroad…we live in different times with different values, but they judge me with their values. If I don't follow their way of life, I am a criminal… then I chose my own path, and now they are expecting me to live a worse life than they do…just to prove they were right and I was wrong (Frank, male, 23 years old).

Although the participants do not agree with certain values and the overseas experiences have facilitated this shift, to the majority of them, the Netherlands still fails to give a sense of belonging:

> I love the Netherlands, but I don't belong here. I don't have a sense of belonging here. I belong to China. Even if I want to work here, I won't give up my Chinese passport (Justine, female, 23 years old).

> China gives me a sense of belonging, a very strong sense of home (Holly, female, 26 years old).

One student, even after sharing his story about Cultural Revolution, which had very negative influences on at least three generations of his family, still maintained that China gave him a sense of belonging:

> I hate Chinese society and environment, and many more. But this does not change what is in my blood. When I see a Chinese idiom, or a line from Chinese classics, I feel a very strong sense of belonging. I think this is the influence of the Chinese language, and nothing can change that (Edwin, male, 28 years old).

Another student emphasized his love for his country and his strong sense of belonging also because of his unique personal experience. He has been funded by the Chinese government throughout his education from his bachelor's to PhD study:

> My country has been taking care of me. If I can, I want to contribute to higher education in China with what I have achieved from my education here. For me that is the most valuable (Jacob, male, 28 years old).

There is also one case where the student felt that he was placed in an extremely awkward position while discussing identity and sense of belonging:

> It's very hard to tell. When I was in China, I felt I was so different from others. I couldn't totally integrate. But now I am here, I still can't integrate into this society…because I am gay. Many people don't accept this in China. I was worried that they wouldn't accept me. I couldn't get along because of that. Now I can't either,

> because of the cultural differences…so my identity…I am just myself, a firework with a different color…I used to think too much before I did everything. Luckily, now I've learned to embrace and just experience what life brings to me (Godwin, male, 23 years old).

Furthermore, most students in this group discussed how the life and study overseas have facilitated their personal development, which also changed how they talked and thought about themselves. They mentioned their achievement in life skills and English competency, improvement in their own fields of study and their ability to think independently and critically. Five out of ten students proudly maintained "I can survive anywhere in the world now". Such remarks reflected the process in which they have constructed their new selves.

7.4.3 Category III: Diverse Storylines, Constant Negotiation

The students in this group shared a larger variety of storylines than the previous two groups, due to longer stay in the Netherlands and their diverse experiences. They provided different examples of this constant movement of flowing and drifting in their identity negotiation.

For some of them, after several years of studying and working in a foreign country, they came to appreciate their own culture even more than before. Chinese culture is something that they would expect to preserve:

> I am Chinese and this will never change. I don't want to lose the Chinese part of me. For example, I want to keep learning Sinology, and I hope to pass it on to my children (Nelson, male, 26 years old).

They were able to recognize the problems in China while cherishing certain values, and also emphasized the importance of not forgetting about where they came from. These reinforced their perception of who they really are:

> I know there are a lot of problems in the Chinese society, so are there in the Netherlands. But there are good things in China as well. For example, we have a closer and stronger tie with family. This is something I don't want my children or myself to lose. A person can't forget where his roots are (Nancy, female, 29 years old).

Some talked about how they integrated into the Dutch or Western culture over the years, and even found difficulties living back at home. However, for them, their Chinese identity still carries great significance, which will never change:

> I can't live in China now. I can't even have my privacy and my mom interferes everything. I spent some time at home and I really had enough…but I am Chinese. That cannot change (Maggie, female, 24 years old).

Leona regarded herself as being Westernized after six years, since the ways she thinks about and deals with problems "are more Western than Chinese", whereas she still maintained her sense of belonging towards China:

> I am a Chinese living in the Netherlands. Changing my passport doesn't change the fact that I am Chinese (Leona, female, 25 years old).

Olivia also considered her mindset as more "Dutch", and really appreciated Dutch "directness" and that "there is no hierarchy between the colleagues and the big boss". However, she claimed:

> I don't belong here. I don't emphasize my identity as Chinese, but I am a foreigner. For me, there is no difference between an American and me because we are foreigners (Olivia, female, 25 years old).

Olivia and Nelson both mentioned that they do not speak Dutch, which is possibly why they do not integrate well with the local Dutch or do not find a sense of belonging in the Dutch society.

However, one student out of ten in this group (and thirty in total), having studied and worked here for more than five years, identified his changes and confirmed that the Netherlands gives him a sense of belonging:

> In China many people are pursuing a better life, more money and higher social status. It is not wrong to do so. But it is terrible to only value your personal benefits and ignore other important things in life. For me the greatest happiness is simple: family and friends…For me, the Netherlands is a home away from home. Especially when I went on a business trip or went back to China, I realized this place had so much influence on me (Martin, male, 26 years old).

Another student, Keith, though sharing the similar experience with Martin, found himself a stranger both in his home culture and in the Western culture, feeling "lost in between":

> I feel the way I do things is more Western, but I haven't integrated into this society. But then I think differently from those who study at home. I can't even communicate well with them because we don't have common topics. I want to further my career in China, but then I am really lost. Where should I go? Can I get used to the Chinese society? Where do I belong? (Keith, male, 24 years old)

Two students, Leo (male, 24 years old) and Oliver (male, 26 years old), maintained that it was not necessary to identify themselves as Chinese or Dutch, neither did they attach their sense of belonging to any of the two countries. For Leo, being authentic is essential to define who he is, no matter what happens or what kind of people he encounters. Oliver prefers not to be confined to a certain identity. Instead, he rather considers himself a global citizen, and would

not mind constantly drifting in his identity negotiation. Oliver's way of defining who he is gives him a tremendous sense of freedom.

However diverse the storylines could be, for this group of students, the encounters with multi-culture have had a positive impact upon them, especially in how they address different problems and behave towards different people. They have learned not to judge when meeting people from different cultural backgrounds. Not only did their worldview revolve into a broader and more positive direction, but more markedly, as many confirmed, they achieved a stronger and more open mind and are capable of shouldering their responsibility.

7.5 Concluding Remarks

From these findings, it is evident that the Chinese students in this research did not regard everything in the Western society as superior. Instead, most of them were capable of identifying the advantages that both China and the West provided for them. Regarding their perceptions on their motherland, on the one hand, they expressed their sense of pride towards China and being Chinese, as well as the virtues of Chinese culture. On the other hand, they discussed an extensive range of problems facing the environment in China, both natural and social, for which, some claimed that they were not proud. Due to various reasons, some participants were subjected to negative treatment from other nationalities, especially Westerners, some of which were believed to be prejudice and discrimination against Chinese. However, they expressed willingness to facilitate the world's understanding of the real China.

In addition, students with only about three months' experiences attached a sense of belonging to their home and family in China. For them the opportunity to see the world and become independent is essential as it facilitates the process of defining who they want to become. For those who have been studying in the Netherlands for more than a year, although the influence of the Chinese values was embodied in them before they realized it, still many of them experienced a drastic shift from pursuance of money and success to valuing one's health, happiness, family and friends. Such a shift did not change the fact that most of them still attached a great sense of belonging to their homeland China. Another group of students, due to their longer stay and diverse experiences, shared various storylines about their negotiation. Some hoped to preserve their Chinese culture, and some reinforced their Chinese identity while integrating into the Western culture, while a few expressed a sentiment of being lost when talking about identity and belonging. In general, they considered their overall

experiences as positive, which contributed considerably to their personal growth: to cultivate them into more independent, self-confident, responsible, positive adults with broader, braver, stronger, and more open minds.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

This study aims to explore how Chinese students perceive and experience higher education in the Netherlands. For this purpose, it analyzes the views of different actors including thirty Chinese students and eleven lecturers, international student advisors and admission officers. To conclude this study, first of all, a summary of the main findings is presented in this chapter. Based on the sub-questions that guided the study, results cover the students' motivations to pursue a Dutch education, the differences they encountered in both culture and pedagogy, and the influence of these differences on their learning experiences, and the impact of their experiences upon identity construction. The discussion engages with a range of other international studies in order to compare how the present study confirms or contradicts with previous research findings. Besides, implications for policy and practice are also provided during the discussion. Finally, suggestions for future research are offered.

8.1 Overview of Main Findings and Implications for Policy and Practice

8.1.1 A Journey to the Netherlands

The research findings indicate that motivations for pursuing a Dutch higher education are related to conditions both in China and in the Netherlands. Many participants acknowledged their frustration at the perceived low quality of higher education in China, while giving credit merely to first-class universities. Moreover, students are disappointed at certain values or common norms that they believe Chinese society imposes on them, such as the "school-job-marriage-children" life path and endless pursuance of money and success. In comparison to such disadvantages, many participants expect Dutch higher education institutions to provide them with higher-quality education with a renowned reputation, or in some cases, with world-leading research capacity. Many have a tendency to believe that the Dutch education, as well as the working experiences overseas, will facilitate their achievement of a distinctive career profile and increase their prospects of employability and competitiveness back in the Chinese

employment market. In addition, their desire for English language proficiency and intercultural immersion, broadening their horizons and exploring the outside world have also triggered their decisions to pursue their studies in the Netherlands. These results confirm a number of earlier studies which showed that the driving factors for Chinese students to seek education opportunities overseas included good institutional reputation and recognition, greater employability, cultural enrichment, personal growth and development (Bodycott 2009; McMahon 2011; Bamber 2014; Wu 2014; Moufahim & Lim 2015). In line with the findings on Chinese students, studies on international students from other Asian countries, such as India and Indonesia (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002), Thailand (Pimpa 2005), Japan and Korea (Chen 2007) also substantiated that such factors exerted much influence on students' decisions to study abroad.

Moreover, as aforementioned studies focused on Asian / Chinese students' choices on English-speaking countries such as the US, the UK, Australia and Canada, what is unique about the current study is that it explains the participants' preference for a Dutch education. One of the discouraging factors, as most frequently mentioned by the Chinese students, is the high tuition in those four countries. Meanwhile, as there is a massive influx of international students, especially Chinese students, into those countries, the participants are concerned about the quality of education, even the opportunity to practice English being jeopardized and the academic atmosphere being undermined. Furthermore, in order to attract international talents, the Dutch government has been offering residence permits of one "orientation year" for highly educated people, and some higher institutions have been attracting Chinese students with deliberate policies and scholarships. These factors also greatly motivated the Chinese students to pursue their education in the Netherlands.

These findings provide specific insights into the Chinese students' expectations of Dutch higher education, and thus might have important implications for the policy makers in the Dutch government and higher education institutions. First of all, the government policies on international students could be more flexible in terms of the duration of working permit. For instance, the orientation year could be extended to two to three years. Since the Netherlands has been aiming to attract more highly educated people, those who are capable of strengthening the national economy or "knowledge economy", it would be beneficial to allow them a longer period of contribution. As the students also expect to distinguish themselves with overseas study and working experiences, this policy would probably achieve a win-win outcome. Secondly, higher education institutions need to develop a better understanding of

the expectations and choices of international students and acknowledge that these vary among students with different country of origin. This would improve their competitiveness within the study-abroad market. To attract Chinese students or Asian students in general, emphasis can be focused on the quality of education, the reputation of institutions, as well as the academic atmosphere. On the other hand, it is important that students are able to receive adequate knowledge about institutions before they make their decisions. Specific policies could also be developed or platforms for information exchange established if institutions are targeting specific nationalities.

8.1.2 Dutch / Western Culture – Beyond Adaptation

The Chinese students' experiences in the Netherlands, which is a multi-cultural environment, prove to be a constant process of adaption and adjustment. First and foremost, being extremely direct was recognized by most participants as a unique characteristic of Dutch people. Although resulting in students' awkwardness occasionally, such a difference was highly appreciated by some students. Compared to "being direct", "going Dutch" enjoys a greater popularity among Chinese students, as many confirmed that it indicates equality and mutual respect. In addition, some students think highly of Europeans' friendliness towards strangers, while on the other hand, it seems to be a challenge to achieve a close friendship with Dutch classmates or colleagues, partly because they attach great importance to personal life. As their experiences in the Netherlands have hardly been documented, these findings contribute to understanding the cultural nuances that the Chinese students have encountered in the Dutch society.

Moreover, students identified the difficulty in adjusting to the Western party culture and challenges in understanding jokes and humor. Such findings echo Spencer-Oatey and Xiong's research (2006) on Chinese students in British universities, in which some of the items that were rated the most difficult included "making friends with students of other nationalities" or even "starting a conversation with people of other nationalities" (p. 43). By adopting Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, one participant explained that different cultures lead to various values, which further cause people with different cultural backgrounds to behave differently (Hofstede 2012). According to the student, the Netherlands is a typical small-power-distance feminine country, where individualism is highly appreciated. Thus the "I" consciousness and "speaking one's mind" are greatly encouraged. At the same time, there is no hierarchical difference and rarely social role differentiation between the genders. As a

contrast, China is a large-power-distance masculine country where collectivism is prevalent. Therefore, hierarchy exists throughout the society, and different genders play different social roles. Different values and lack of common interest contribute to Chinese students' low level of social interaction, causing difficulties in sociocultural adjustment. These factors partially explain the reason why many Chinese students tend to cluster in groups and engage less with students of other nationalities, especially non-Asian peers.

Studies on international students indicate that intercultural adaptation while living and studying in a foreign country is essential to students' success in their education, and that it is imperative for all international students to adapt or adjust culturally to their new environment (Ward & Kennedy 2001; Bodycott 2012). Hence one suggestion is that, before Chinese / Asian students come to the Netherlands, the Dutch higher education institutions or Nuffic could provide adequate information about the country and Dutch culture in general. For instance, it would be helpful to issue a comprehensive guide to the Dutch way of living, Dutch norms and values, the rules of etiquette and youth culture. Students can also do research and become familiar with the Dutch multi-cultural society, so they will be well aware of and prepared for the different social behaviors and lifestyles. In addition, since the society, norms and values are changing all the time, such guidance need to remain an ongoing process.

Besides, an introductory course for intercultural communication might be an option for students who expect to narrow the communication gap with international peers. As an alternative method, culture-exchange seminars or culture-integration workshops could also be organized in HEIs, to foster better social relationship and enhance mutual understanding among students with different nationalities. Students are also encouraged to participate actively in cultural events or follow the cultural programs if they wish to get involved in other communities rather than cluster with their own nationalities.

As early as in 1999, Chen discussed some common stressors for international students, mainly from developing countries, both at colleges and universities in Canada and the United States. He pointed out that international students experienced a high level of social isolation as they had difficulties in acculturation, such as value and lifestyle conflicts (Chen 1999). Chinese students, as well as other international students, are likely to encounter problems resulting from "cultural shock" - a multifaceted experience occurring when people come in contact with a different culture (Winkelman 1994, p. 121). Fortunately, none of the participants in

this research reported any case of social isolation or serious reaction. None of them experienced high level of cultural shock, such as, frustration, tension, helplessness, or cultural differences becoming irritating, as discussed by Winkelman (1994) when defining the term "cultural shock". The participants' desire to expose to the Western culture and experience the world have mitigated the negative effects while adjusting to the new culture, which also echoed Brown's study (2009) on international students in the UK, with the majority of them from South East Asia. Some of the Chinese students in this study do not consider it necessary to adjust themselves to or integrate into the host culture. Instead, a two-way integration and mutual respect assume great significance, as well as the journey to discover the unknown and expand their worldview. These findings are distinctive as they reveal the changes and challenges that international and multicultural environment could bring about, and the Chinese students' unique way to take on these challenges. Therefore, instead of stimulating international students only to adapt to the Western culture, the above-recommended course or workshop could encourage students to embrace and maintain the uniqueness of their cultural traits, and to integrate with each other.

8.1.3 Navigating Pedagogy Overseas

Criticism on China's exam-oriented education has been increasing in the past decade (Dello-Iacovo 2009), as well as on the teacher-centered pedagogy. Literature also indicates that many Chinese do not regard their own system as successful or of high quality, which is one of the reasons for frustrated Chinese parents to pursue education for their children abroad (Wu & Zheng 2008). Some Chinese students also appeared to be critical of the Chinese system and considered the Western learning experience as more desirable despite its challenges (Moufahim & Lim 2015). However, remarkably, this study has achieved different results on Chinese students' views, which might illuminate some of the common (mis)conceptions on education in China and in the West. Having investigated how the Chinese students in the Netherlands perceive the education that they have received, this research found out that most of the participants did not only appreciate the education in the Netherlands but that in China as well, based on their learning experiences in both countries. The education in China, either through high schools or in higher education institutions, is believed to have empowered some participants with useful learning skills and fostered good learning habits, despite the fact that it remains exam-oriented. Moreover, some attribute their proficiency in certain fields and the strength of their will to their previous education in China.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the exam-oriented and teacher-centered education has negative influences on students' creativity, and their ability to think critically or independently. Some also mentioned that their curiosity had been silenced and was even incapable of identifying what they were really interested in, as a consequence of being dependent on others. In contrast, the education in the Dutch higher institutions has enabled some students to develop their creative and analytical abilities, and has encouraged their independent and critical thinking as well. This was also discussed in Durkin's (2008a) study on Asian master's students in the British universities. Students from East Asian countries including China, Japan, Thailand and Indonesia tried to adapt to the Western norms of critical thinking and argumentation. The majority of them eventually chose a "middle way" which combines their own cultural approach to critical thinking with that of the Western style. In their point of view, the Western style of critiques and debates appears to be too insensitive and unnecessarily offensive. Hence, they opted for rejecting this "confrontational battlefield approach" (Durkin 2008b, p. 49).

The differences and challenges that the overseas studies have encountered vary from one student to another. For some of them, since most of the examinations and assessment criteria are different, such as more application of knowledge to practice instead of memorization and repetition, the participants endeavor to adjust to the new standards. For others, the lack of experiences and the language barrier, as well as different cultural backgrounds contribute to the ineffectiveness in working with other international students, which further lead to discomfort, a lack of confidence and even depression. Echoing these results, Wu (2015) suggested that support should be provided for students as part of guidance for group learning. Otherwise it was likely that students would achieve unsatisfactory results, and group work would be time-consuming, tedious and even irrelevant to many students (p. 760). In some studies, researchers found that the language barrier was one of the obvious reasons for Chinese students' (in the UK and Canada) lack of active participation or communication (Wang 2010; Zhou et al. 2005), whereas Li and Ha's (2014) study on Chinese students in Australia indicated that the language barrier could also motivate some students to speak up rather than hinder them from classroom participation (p. 239).

In the Dutch classrooms, much active participation is expected and a free and informal style is encouraged, whereas most Chinese students do not speak up or raise questions as often as their Western peers. Many consider it beneficial to interact and integrate with their classmates, but do not agree that being silent equals to uncritical thinking or learning passively. In typical

Chinese classrooms remaining silent is simply a way for students to show respect to teachers. Some also maintain that it is meaningless or time-consuming to endlessly discuss simple questions. Such findings do not only confirm but extend Li & Ha's (2014) study. They discussed that Chinese students are stereotyped as passive learners who are reluctant to speak up in classrooms, while their research results illustrated that remaining silent was more about a choice and a right for students, which should not be viewed as something negative. Furthermore, another impressive finding on classroom pedagogy is that the lecturing styles are quite similar in the Dutch and Chinese systems. These findings might inform prospective Chinese students wishing to study abroad of what to expect in a Western education, which could be different from their perceptions.

This comprehensive analysis of pedagogical differences may be able to raise the awareness of policy makers about how to better cater to the needs of international students. In order to support students with a different pedagogical background in their transition to the new learning environment, it is recommended that a foundation program be designed at Dutch HEIs. The program might last from one to three months, aiming to facilitate students' understanding and prepare them in:

Classroom participation: Students could be encouraged to take an active approach, and be given an explanation of what is expected in a more informal class - interactive learning is highly appreciated, individual opinions as well as critical ideas respected and welcomed.

Group work: Students are supposed to work as a team, and guidance or practical skills could be provided to enable students to engage sufficiently with group members.

Presentation: Students are given opportunities to practice their presentation skills, meanwhile a relaxing and friendly classroom atmosphere may be created to inspire and support those who lack experiences or confidence in presenting themselves.

HEIs might consider having their own unique foundation program, as there are differences among them in terms of educational cultures and requirements for students. Beside, a coaching or buddy system could be created or developed in HEIs, where the students with the same nationalities who have already graduated could coach the new coming students. Coming from the same cultural background and speaking the same language, students will be able to communicate smoothly while sharing their experiences studying in the Netherlands. Most importantly, this system will facilitate their understanding about what difficulties and challenges they might encounter and further ease the transition process.

The existing literature is not limited to the discussion of Chinese learners, but reveals some assumptions about non-Western learners in general. Holliday (2005) pointed out the tendency of perceiving non-Western students as a 'reduced other' within Anglophone Western academia. Their lack of some characteristics expected by the Western educators is considered as problematic. Being consistent with such views, Grimshaw (2007) found such construct of Asian learners rather problematic and also some writers regard it as "a legacy of colonialism" (p. 301). Rather than "fix" these learners, Gu and Schweisfurth (2006) suggested that it is essential to understand students' needs and more emphasis should be placed upon the adaptation of Western universities to accommodate their international students.

Understanding students' cultural and educational backgrounds is essential in the international educational context. This study generates another finding that might offer implications for teachers: In the Chinese education system, even though teachers play a more dominant role in the teacher-student relationship, they do offer more support and guidance. Such support or guidance is missing in the Western system, and therefore students find it tedious and confusing to learn all by themselves. In the case of Chinese students in the Netherlands, it is crucial for students themselves to adapt to the new learning environment and different pedagogies, and so is it for educators as well, to adjust their ways of teaching and commitment to students.

Therefore, in line with the postcolonial analysis of international students and the call for an engaged pedagogy (Madge et al. 2009), and discussions on culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 1995; Han et al. 2014) and critical pedagogy (McLaren 1999; Pitts and Brooks 2016), educators might consider adopting the most beneficial approaches according to different programs of study. Whatever programs Chinese / Asian students are studying, it is important to note that they mostly are not outspoken and thus the silent ones should not be regarded as underqualified or passive learners. Teaching students with different cultural backgrounds in one classroom can be a great challenge. However, in order to ensure the education quality, educators need to be prepared for accommodating the specific nature of Chinese / Asian students. One suggestion would be to integrate the most feasible and practical aspects of the aforementioned pedagogies: to involve genuine dialogues, show more care and commitment and build up supportive relationships, while recognizing and valuing students' own cultures.

8.1.4 Negotiating Chinese Identity in Western Civilization

There has been discussion in China that the media, advertisements, news and trends favor the West, which has affected the younger generation of Chinese people (China Daily 2015). Contrary to such perception, this study presents some interesting findings on the Chinese students' views on China and the West. Most of the Chinese students in this study expressed their appreciation towards both China and Europe, with none of them regarding everything in the Western society as superior. Except for two students who shared a vision of "Big China" due to the booming economy, the others adopted a neutral position. Not only did they treasure the Chinese history and culture, the rapid progress in science and technology, but they recognized the benefits in Europe such as better infrastructure and good environment, more freedom of speech, as well as inclusiveness of the society. Thanks to the rising national power of China, and the richness of their culture, among other factors, the Chinese students exhibited a sense of pride towards their motherland. While adopting an objective point of view, they did not deny the truth that China has been facing various problems. The serious pollution, fierce competition, uneven distribution of resources, inequality in the society, and undereducated people with bad behaviors account for the major concerns of the whole country. While mentioning people's vicious pursuance of personal benefits, some students claimed that they are not proud of being Chinese.

It is reported in the news that there has been increasing discrimination against foreign students in some countries (University World News 2016). Literature on international students also indicates that prejudice and discrimination has been a problem both inside and outside of campus (Poyrazli & Grahame 2007; Bonazzo & Wong 2007; Hanassab 2006; Hsieh 2007; Cho 2009). Lee and Rice's research (2007) explored international students' experiences in the US and revealed many stories of discrimination. Among the participants, a number of Asian students, including those from Vietnam, India, Japan and China, reported cases of inhospitality, misperceptions about their culture, and more direct abuse such as verbal insults, and even physical attacks both on and off campus. Some even mentioned being harassed but incapable of defending themselves or negative experiences involved actions and attitudes of professors (p. 397). Similar to such findings, the Chinese students in this research also reported examples of prejudice and discrimination from other nationalities, especially Westerners. Although students shared the impression that some of the negative treatments were associated with ill-behaved Chinese overseas, the others cases, they believed, resulted from Westerners' biased misperceptions of non-Western countries.

These findings imply that Non-Western students may need to be aware of the existence of prejudice and discrimination, which could be part of their daily life. Should they encounter unfairness, negative treatment or even threatening situations, they could seek help and support from their institutions, even though most of them are tolerant. On the other hand, the institutions might consider providing (if they do not have) a list of "trust people" who could offer assistance, or counsellors and psychologists who are professional in resolving such problems. Most importantly, the concerned governmental institutions might also need to be aware of their responsibility and develop programs such as cultural events or exhibitions, public debates or discussions, and involve people with different cultural backgrounds. Such programs shall serve to promote understanding and foster acceptance across different nationalities, eliminate misconceptions and reject stereotypes among them.

In seeking how they define themselves and how they make meaning out of themselves, and in the process of negotiating with their surroundings, the Chinese students with different lengths of stay in the Netherlands shared various views. For the students who started their study in 2016 and had about three months' experiences by the time of the interviews, their home and family in China is where they attach their sense of belonging. In negotiating with themselves about who they want to become, they found the meaning of the overseas experiences - to open up their horizon to a different world, and to facilitate their growth into independent and confident human beings.

Those who have been studying for more than a year recognized the precious opportunity to re-invent who they are, as they witnessed in themselves a shift of values - from blind pursuance of money and success to the priceless gifts life has presented: health, happiness, family and friends. Their conception of belonging, therefore, has also been "upgraded" to a wider range: China, their homeland, is where they belong. In the reflections of how they have constructed their new selves, this study observed a group of proud young people who claimed to be capable of surviving anywhere in the world.

The last group of students either already finished study and have been working ever since, or resumed their study after working for some time, with the duration of stay in the Netherlands varying from two to seven years. For them, the identity negotiation has been a constant process of drifting and floating. Some of them confirmed their integration into the Dutch or Western culture, or even considered themselves as being Westernized, whereas such

experiences did not have influence on their own perception of their Chinese identity. While cherishing certain values the West has endowed them with, they foregrounded the Chinese heritage that could be passed down to the next generation. Wherever they attach their sense of belonging, in China, in the Netherlands, or somewhere in between, or further, in the global world, those strong- and open-minded young people seem to have developed a positive attitude towards their encounters in life.

These research findings are consistent with some earlier studies. Brown and Brown's (2009) ethnographic study of international students in the UK, with the majority from South East Asia and a third from Europe, Africa and the Middle East, illustrates the transformative power of the international student "sojourn". Being provided with the opportunity for self-discovery, the students became independent, strong, assertive and thoughtful. Other researchers pointed out the significance of a sense of belonging - to enable students to experience less distress and a better adjustment to academic life (Slaten et al. 2016). Koehne's (2005) study illustrates that the ways international students construct and reconstruct their identities are rather fluid and complex. Raysky's (2011) qualitative research on East Asian international students in the US found out that most students integrated parts of the host culture and appeared likely to develop bi-cultural identity. The current study extends those findings by presenting insights in terms of different storylines of identity development and what carries meanings for the various groups of Chinese students (with different lengths of stay in the Netherlands) in their identity negotiation.

8.2 Suggestions on Future Research

There are several avenues of research that could extend the current study. First and foremost, the investigation into classroom pedagogy could be replicated under different conditions. This study tried to explore the experiences of thirty Chinese students, whereas it was not able to compare different degree programs, namely bachelor's, master's and PhD programs. Hence using the theoretical framework provided by this study, other researchers could enquire into students' perceptions and experiences within each degree. For instance, research on bachelor students could focus more on classroom activities and interaction, teaching and learning styles, while for masters and PhD students, more emphasis may be placed on the role of lecturers or supervisors and their cooperation with students. Such an approach would deepen the understanding on students' expectations and challenges since the requirements and educational cultures may vary across different degree programs. Another suggestion would be

repeating this study in different types of higher education institutions. This study included students from eight HEIs, but did not present the differences during the analysis because of the small size of the sample. Building upon the foundation of this study, the research on students with various educational traits could yield different results. Furthermore, in order to analyze how cultural context of the society and the pedagogical environment might be leading to different influences and outcomes, it is recommended to also carry out comparative studies of Chinese students in different countries.

Another important direction for future research would be to follow up the students' learning behaviors over a longer period of time. For instance, to what extent will the pedagogical changes influence on their styles of learning? What strategies do they employ to adjust to the changes? How will such changes eventually impact on their learning outcomes? More importantly, since a strong emphasis has been given to cultivating critical minds, future researchers could also undertake a longitudinal study to investigate how they would perceive differently the critical thinking they have achieved from their Western education, especially after they return home and immerse themselves again in their own culture.

Moreover, future study could also focus on the process of students' identity negotiation. It is worth exploring what factors have contributed to the reconstruction of their identity. Conducting a longitudinal research tracking the changes on their perceptions on identity could be an option as well. It would be even more interesting to carry out a comparative study on the differences between the students staying in the Netherlands for more than five years and those who have returned home after years of study. Such a study may explore what social norms or values may have deeply rooted in them, and whether or to what extent they would affect Chinese students' perceptions on their identity.

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