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Perceptions on the Dutch society and national identity by Chinese exchange students during the COVID-19 pandemic

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**Perceptions on the Dutch society and
national identity by
Chinese exchange students
during the COVID-19 pandemic**

a Master Graduation thesis by Mendel Brandt

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Introduction

In March 2020, the entire world was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ It caused a societal shift in many countries, most of them forced into a lockdown which changed the course of daily lives for anyone affected. While this societal shift was taxing for nearly all people regardless of age or occupation, it caused a particularly difficult situation for international exchange students. Not only was global travel put on hold because of the lockdown, causing many students to be stuck outside of their home country, but the pandemic also resulted in societies being locked down from the inside. International exchange students already face difficulties in integrating into foreign societies due to linguistic and cultural difficulties. The lockdown brought more difficulties, as opportunities for social interaction were curtailed and cultural activities closed down.

International exchange students are interesting research subjects, as they come into an established community as outsiders, and might perceive this community in a very different manner than the local population. This perception can even differ within the group of international exchange students, who all have different national backgrounds. How one perceives a foreign community is also influenced by the degree of sociocultural integration, as well as one's own personal background and national identity. The COVID-19 pandemic not only fundamentally changed the functioning of societies, but it also changed the mobility of people - international exchange students foremost among others - within that society. It is therefore interesting and valuable how international exchange students have come to perceive a foreign community in the context of COVID-19. As I am based in the Netherlands, I have chosen to investigate how international exchange students, more specifically Chinese exchange students, have come to view Dutch society during the COVID-19 pandemic

In recent years, Chinese exchange students have become the largest group of international exchange students worldwide², making them increasingly important research subjects. Multiple studies have been performed on the experience of Chinese exchange students during their time abroad, as the literature review section of this thesis will show. However, very little research has been performed on the experience of Chinese exchange students in foreign

¹ World Health Organization, 2020

² Jiang, 2021, 192

countries in the context of COVID-19, as this is a very recent development. This research aims to contribute to this field of study. Outside of investigating how Chinese exchange students have come to view Dutch society during the pandemic, this thesis also aims to research how their degree of integration has influenced their views on Dutch society. Finally, this research aims to investigate how staying in the Netherlands has changed how Chinese exchange students have come to view their national identity, as coming into contact with different cultures causes active reflection on cultural differences and background.

The main research question of this thesis is:

“How have Chinese exchange students come to view Dutch society when they were staying in the Netherlands during the COVID-19 pandemic?”

This research question is aided by the sub questions:

- **“What role did the degree of integration of Chinese exchange students into Dutch and international communities play in the shaping of their views on Dutch society?”**
- **“How did their time in the Netherlands influence the way Chinese exchange students regard their own Chinese national identity?”**

Background information on the COVID-19 pandemic

As a lot of aspects of Dutch society were affected by the pandemic, the ways in which exchange students could experience and get to know Dutch society were affected as well. Therefore, in this chapter I describe a general image of how Dutch society was affected by the pandemic. I also want to give a short overview of how the pandemic developed both in the Netherlands and in China, as the manner in which the Dutch and Chinese government dealt with the pandemic were very different from one another. It can be expected that the manner in which the government from your home country deals with a situation as severe as a pandemic influences your opinion on how the government in your country of exchange deals with this pandemic. For the aim of my thesis and as a background for my research question, it is therefore important to know the differences between these two separate pandemic policies. With this information, it is also easier to understand how certain opinions Chinese exchange students have about Dutch society have come into being.

Dutch society and the pandemic

The COVID-19 crisis emerged late December 2019, when the first cases were identified in the Chinese city of Wuhan.³ It was declared a worldwide pandemic on March 11th, 2020.⁴ Soon after, the recorded cases of COVID-19 in the Netherlands increased exponentially on a daily basis. The Dutch government declared the Netherlands to be under a so-called “intelligent lockdown” on March 23rd, 2020.⁵ This meant that, while people were not under a completely strict lockdown, everyone had to follow certain rules and were subjected to limitations in their daily life. People were asked to keep 1.5 meters distance from one another, where possible. Every education institution switched to giving online classes. Barbershops, gyms, commercial stores, the service industry and cultural institutions such as

³ Now, 2019

⁴ World Health Organization, 2020

⁵ Rijksoverheid, 2020

museums were shut down.⁶ Infection and death rates rose between March 2020 and late April 2020.⁷ After these rates started to decrease in mid May 2020, several regulations like the closing of barbershops and gyms were lifted.⁸ On June 1st, 2020, all people in the Netherlands were required to wear a face mask in public transportation.⁹ In early September 2020, infection rates started to go up rapidly. This resulted in the Dutch government declaring a partial lockdown in mid-October 2020.¹⁰ As the infection rates continued to rise in the months that followed, creating a burden which the Dutch healthcare system could not keep up with, the Dutch government declared a full lockdown in December 2020.¹¹ In January 2021, the Dutch government enforced an evening curfew, which lasted until late April 2021.¹² It wasn't until June 2021 that the lockdown was lifted and the entirety of Dutch society opened up again.¹³ However, in October 2021 the infection rates went up yet again, resulting in another partial lockdown in November 2021, only to be followed by a full lockdown in December 2021.¹⁴ At this point, dissatisfaction with the lockdown policies set by the Dutch government rose to the point that some Dutch people started protesting against these policies.¹⁵ The first easing of lockdown regulations took place in January 2022, and the lockdown was fully lifted in March 2022.¹⁶ At the time of writing, June 2022, no further restrictions related to COVID-19 have been put on Dutch society.

COVID-19 in China

After the COVID-19 crisis was officially declared a pandemic, the Chinese government opted to employ a “zero infection rate” philosophy in their policy-making. This meant that they did not want a single Chinese person to get infected with COVID-19.¹⁷ By January 29, 2020, the

⁶ Rijksoverheid, 2020

⁷ Rijksoverheid, 2020

⁸ Rijksoverheid, 2020

⁹ Rijksoverheid, 2020

¹⁰ Rijksoverheid, 2020

¹¹ Rijksoverheid, 2020

¹² Rijksoverheid, 2021

¹³ Rijksoverheid, 2021

¹⁴ Rijksoverheid, 2021

¹⁵ NOS, 2022

¹⁶ Rijksoverheid, 2022

¹⁷ Normile, 2021

Chinese government had quarantined all cities in Hubei province, where the first cases of COVID-19 were discovered.¹⁸ All travel to and from Wuhan was stopped on January 23, 2020.¹⁹ Outside of Wenzhou city in Zhejiang province, no other Chinese cities were put under a lockdown in early 2020.²⁰ In late March and early April 2020, lockdowns in almost all Chinese cities were lifted.²¹ Nonetheless, mass tests were still undertaken in an entire city if only a few cases of infection were discovered.²² The infection rates in China managed to remain under 100 new cases per day, until March 2022. At that time, there was a sudden upsurge in infection rates that managed to hit a peak of nearly 30.000 new daily cases of COVID-19 in mid-April 2022. As of June 2022, the number of new daily cases has dropped to an average of 150.²³

Comparison between China and the Netherlands

When we look at the ways in which China and the Netherlands decided to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, we can see they are very different. The Chinese government locked down an entire province, after the first cases of COVID-19 were discovered in one city within that province. This resulted in an effective containment of the COVID-19 virus at that time, as infection rates remained at a low point that did not surpass 100 new infections per day. The situation changed after an outbreak in April 2022, yet this was contained within two months, returning to the low point of 100 new infections on a daily basis.

The Dutch government, on the other hand, started out by enforcing an “intelligent lockdown”, and increased the severity of the lockdown as numbers went up. This continued until the point where the numbers were too high for the health care system to cope with, at which point a full lockdown was enforced. The full lockdown was more successful in bringing down infection rates, as I mentioned in the first section of this chapter. However, this caused the Dutch government to ease the enforced measures and eventually lift the lockdown completely, which in turn only led to an increase in numbers after a couple of months, and

¹⁸ SCMP, 2020

¹⁹ Duowei News, 2020

²⁰ The Straits Times, 2020

²¹ CNN, 2020

²² Business Insider, 2020

²³ Our World in Data, 2022

yet another full lockdown following a partial lockdown. Many Dutch people complained about the Dutch lockdown policies, and as mentioned earlier was even protested again by some. The wearing of face masks is another thing that proved to be a difficult rule to enforce at first, as Dutch people had no previous experience with being forced to wear a face mask in public. This is in stark contrast to China, where it is much more common to wear a face mask, even when it is not enforced by the government.

The goal of this thesis is not to draw conclusions on which COVID-19 lockdown policies were the most efficient in containing the virus. However, we can conclude that the way in which the Chinese government immediately locked down an entire province and continued to enforce measures long after these lockdowns were lifted resulted in a very constant low amount of infection rates. Not only were the infection rates at a constant low, but the majority of the Chinese population did not have to adapt to new measures on a regular basis. The Dutch government, on the other hand, was constantly adapting their policy to the situation at hand, which resulted in infection rates going up and down ever since the first lockdown. This also resulted in all people in the Netherlands constantly having to adjust to new rules and circumstances, sometimes not knowing what to expect from future measures. For exchange students unfamiliar within the Dutch foreign community, this can be especially confusing.

Literature review: Integration and global identities

This thesis focuses on four important aspects:

1. The manner in which Chinese exchange students view Dutch society
2. The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on shaping this view
3. The influence of sociocultural integration on shaping this view
4. The manner in which Chinese exchange students have come to view their national identity after coming to the Netherlands

Therefore, I have selected research literature concerning the experiences of Chinese exchange students during their time abroad. More specifically, these articles dive into the influence their time abroad has had on how Chinese exchange students perceive their own identity, as well as how their identity has influenced their degree of integration into foreign countries. Several articles focus on Chinese exchange students in the Netherlands, while others focus on Chinese exchange students in the United States, Russia and Italy. Some of these articles specifically discuss the national identity of Chinese students when abroad in the context of COVID-19.

In this literature review, I want to discuss how the selected research articles describe the concept of national identity among Chinese exchange students, and the manner in which Chinese exchange students regard the foreign communities they find themselves in during their time abroad. I will first discuss and compare literature concerning the concepts of national identity and sociocultural integration among Chinese exchange students in the Netherlands, as well as how these students experienced the Netherlands. This is followed by a discussion of literature that researches the national identity of Chinese exchange students and Chinese youth in a more global context. Finally, I will discuss and compare research articles that investigate the identity and integration of Chinese exchange students abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chinese students in the Netherlands

I have selected four sources on Chinese exchange students living in the Netherlands. One of these focuses specifically on the Chinese students living in the Netherlands during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is why I will discuss this article in the final section of this chapter. The three remaining research articles all differ in focus.

The first of these articles (Jiang & Altinyelken, 2020) shows how Chinese exchange students have trouble integrating into Dutch society, in the context of classroom pedagogy. The most important barriers presented come from linguistic and cultural differences.²⁴ While this study is more focused on how Chinese students perform in the Dutch education system, it also discusses the matter of integration. In particular, social etiquette in the classroom is mentioned as being an important cultural difference between Dutch and Chinese people. Chinese students tend to be more quiet in the classroom out of respect for the teacher, whereas Dutch students speak up more often for the goal of actively participating in class.²⁵ This caused the Chinese students to get left behind more in class, and it also created more difficulties in socializing with their Dutch peers. Many Chinese students also felt Dutch people to be too direct in their communications, which was considered rude or hurtful.²⁶

The second article (Hong, 2017) creates a more positive image of how Chinese exchange students experience the Netherlands. The Netherlands is seen by them as “safe, egalitarian and open to different cultures”.²⁷ In trying to find out what the main motivation was for Chinese students to go abroad, the study showed that most students wanted to “expand their horizons”.²⁸ The international and tolerant character of the Netherlands made it a suitable destination for many of the students interviewed in Hong’s research.²⁹ Another important factor in creating the positive image that the participants of this research have of the Netherlands is the interaction between Dutch and Chinese students. Whereas the participants in the 2020 research by Jiang & Altinyelken considered the direct way of communication of Dutch people as rude and offensive, the participants in Hong’s research considered this direct

²⁴ Jiang, 2009, 208

²⁵ Jiang, 2009, 209

²⁶ Jiang, 2009, 208

²⁷ Hong, 2017, 1

²⁸ Hong, 2017, 13

²⁹ Hong, 2017, 19

way of communication much more preferable to the indirect way in which most Chinese people communicate. At times, they felt this indirect way of communication made it unclear what exactly the other person was thinking or feeling.³⁰ Other aspects of Dutch society were appreciated as well, such as a “more egalitarian organizational structure” and “more importance on leisure time”, which Hong felt indicated an overall dissatisfaction with China’s modernized society.³¹ However, just like the participants in the 2020 research by Jiang & Altinyelken, participants in Hong’s research also had trouble getting used to certain aspects of their life in the Netherlands. Linguistic differences and certain social customs such as shaking hands made it difficult for them to integrate, and indicated a noticeable cultural difference between Dutch and Chinese people. Participants also felt Dutch people had prejudices against Chinese people based on their appearance and notions concerning the Chinese government.³²

The third article (Jiang & Altinyelken, 2021) focuses specifically on the integration of Chinese students in the Netherlands and the challenges they met during this process. This study places an emphasis on the importance of establishing friendships in the process of integration, which is something the previous two studies did not do. The participants in this study by Jiang & Altinyelken indicate that they were dissatisfied with their level of integration, as they had trouble establishing friendships with both Dutch and other non-Asian students. Language comprehension and different interests in social activities were given as the main obstacles.³³ Participants also found that Dutch students showed a lack of initiative in establishing contact.³⁴ Just like in the research by Hong, participants felt prejudices towards them by Dutch people.³⁵ Unlike the findings by Hong’s research, and similar to the findings in the 2020 research by Jiang & Altinyelken, the participants felt uncomfortable with the direct manner of communication by Dutch people, which they felt was a “typical Dutch characteristic”. Only one out of 28 participants saw the benefit in this direct manner of communication.³⁶ Participants preferred to communicate in a more indirect and non-confrontational way of communicating, which they felt was more typical of Chinese people.³⁷

³⁰ Hong, 2017, 21

³¹ Hong, 2017, 21

³² Hong, 2017, 25-26

³³ Jiang, 2021, 197

³⁴ Jiang, 2021, 200

³⁵ Jiang, 2021, 197

³⁶ Jiang, 2021, 198

³⁷ Jiang, 2021, 203

Despite language barriers, perceived prejudices and discomfort surrounding the Dutch manner of communicating, many participants still indicated they wanted to make more Dutch friends and thus break the sociocultural & linguistic barriers they found stood in the way of successful integration.³⁸

While these studies all differ in focus, they all create the image that social integration into the Netherlands is difficult for Chinese exchange students. They remain segregated from both Dutch people and other non-Asian international exchange students. The main difficulties faced by Chinese exchange students in the process of integration mentioned by these studies include: linguistic differences, differences in social etiquettes, different preferences in manner of communicating, different interests in leisure activities, as well as perceived prejudices and discrimination. While all participants in these studies have mentioned the Netherlands to be an open and tolerant country, they still find trouble in the process of integrating. Furthermore, the perceived prejudices towards China, its people and its government seem to contradict the open and tolerant image Chinese exchange students have of the Netherlands. Finally, it is interesting that the participants in the studies by Jiang & Altinyelken seemed to feel uncomfortable with the direct manner of communicating that they feel all Dutch people uphold, whereas the participants in Hong's research felt this was a positive thing. I will consider these aspects in my own research of how Chinese exchange students have come to view the Netherlands in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chinese identity

Of the sources I selected, three discuss the concept of national identity among Chinese youth outside the context of the Netherlands or COVID-19. These research articles aim to discuss the concept of Chinese national identity in a more global sense. The groups of participants in these researches include Chinese teenagers in China who have come to develop global identities, Chinese exchange students in the United States and Chinese youth immigrants living in Italy. Although these articles differ in focus, they all share important differences and similarities in the way they view and describe national identity among Chinese youth.

³⁸ Jiang, 2021, 204

The first article (Vanessa Fong, 2004) discusses how Chinese teenagers portray nationalism, while at the same time they identify with a global community they deem superior to their home country. This created a wish among these teenagers to bring their home country into this superior imagined community.³⁹ The global identity that these teenagers developed was quite strong. “Many teenagers often spoke as if they themselves were already part of such wealthier societies but unfortunate enough to be stuck in China,” Fong writes.⁴⁰ This research displays how a clash can occur between national identity, patriotism and the development of a more global identity. At the same time, these three concepts can also strengthen one another. The respondents of this research acquire a global identity for the sake of bettering their home country, indicating a heightened sense of nationalism and patriotism, which ultimately comes forth from their national identity.⁴¹

The second article (Raffaetà et.al., 2016) tackles the idea of Chinese youth who develop another national identity separate from the one they grew up with in China. It follows a group of Chinese immigrants living in Italy, who develop what in the article is referred to as an “Italo-Chinese identity”, as a way to better assimilate into their host country.⁴² This article poses a struggle for these Chinese immigrants in their sense of belonging and affiliation, as they want to find a sense of belonging in Italy, where they spend their lives there after immigrating. At the same time, they feel they can never truly integrate into Italian society because of their Chineseness.⁴³ They will always feel more comfortable around other Chinese people, and get more joy out of undertaking activities more typical for Chinese people than Italian people. Because they view themselves as a minority who are looked down upon by Italian people and have trouble integrating into the Italian community as foreigners, these Chinese youth immigrants have come to view their Chinese background in a more negative manner.⁴⁴

The third article (Hail, 2015) deals with how Chinese exchange students display their national identity and patriotism when encountering criticism of China during their time abroad.

Criticism of China by the local population caused the Chinese respondents in this research to

³⁹ Fong, 2004, 632

⁴⁰ Fong, 2004, 635

⁴¹ Fong, 2004, 644

⁴² Raffaetà, 2016, 424

⁴³ Raffaetà, 2016, 426

⁴⁴ Raffaetà, 2016, 427

become more defensive of China. It also made them feel like they could never fully integrate into the host country, as they would always remain foreigners.⁴⁵ This forced them to think more positively of China, as this was the only place they felt they belonged. In result, this also caused the respondents to view Chinese people and Chinese government more in unity, as they felt it was their duty to defend China as a whole when abroad.⁴⁶

While these three studies all focus on different groups of Chinese youth, the identity of each participant is not solely based inside of China. Fong discusses a group of Chinese youth in China who all look up to wealthier Western countries, and actively aspire to make China a part of this group of wealthier countries. Many of the participants in this research express the desire to live the same lifestyle as the people in these wealthier countries. One participant talked about the “American dream of being middle class and having a house and a car in a nice suburb,” stating that’s “not just an American dream” but her dream as well.⁴⁷ Witnessing another country with circumstances these participants deem superior to the circumstances in China makes them think less of their own country. At the same time, however, this also causes them to develop a more global identity that creates the wish to bring China into this imagined global community of wealthier societies. The global identity of these Chinese teenagers heightens their sense of nationalism, and at the same time causes them to try and unite their Chinese national identity with their newfound global identity.

When we look at the study by Raffaetà et.al., we can see how having a national identity outside of the borders of China caused a group of Chinese youth in Italy to think less of their Chinese national identity. It also caused them to develop a national identity that was not limited to simply describing themselves as “being Chinese” or “being Italian”, as they found themselves caught between these two groups of people. Being abroad caused the participants of this research to develop a new national identity, as they found their Chinese national identity was an obstacle in their goal of integrating into the Italian community.⁴⁸ This is the opposite of the participants in Fong’s research, where the participants try to unite their global identity with their national identity for the sake of bettering their own country.

⁴⁵ Hail, 2015, 318

⁴⁶ Hail, 2015, 318

⁴⁷ Fong, 2004, 631

⁴⁸ Raffaetà, 2016, 426-427

The study by Hail combines the findings of the studies by Fong and Raffaetà et.al., in the sense that Chinese exchange students had a lesser sense of belonging and felt more foreign in the host country they found themselves in. As a result, this also strengthened their sense of national pride and Chinese national identity, and made them view China in a more positive light, as they feel it is the only country they could ever consider home.

In all of these researches, the national identity of the participants was affected by their time abroad or by their wishes to go abroad. However, the manner in which their national identity was affected differed in each research. The research by Fong shows a heightened sense of national pride among Chinese teenagers and the accompanying wish to elevate national identity to a global level. The research by Raffaetà et.al. shows Chinese youth in Italy who viewed their Chinese national identity more negatively after their time abroad, causing them to develop a new national identity that might better suit their place as a Chinese person trying to live in and integrate into an Italian environment. The research by Hail also focuses on a group of Chinese youth abroad who had a lesser sense of belonging because of their foreign environment, yet this caused them to have a heightened sense of Chinese national identity instead of a lessened sense of Chinese national identity.

As the studies by Hail and Raffaetà et.al. show, the manner in which Chinese youth outside of China regard themselves to be ‘foreign’ influences how they regard their national identity. For my own research, I want to investigate whether or not their degree of integration into Dutch society has any influence on how Chinese exchange students view their national identity, be it in a negative or positive light.

Chinese exchange students and the COVID-19 pandemic

The final section of my literature review combines two aspects discussed in the previous two sections, namely sociocultural integration and national identity, and places them in the context of COVID-19. In this subchapter, I discuss two research articles that focus on social integration, display of national identity and general overview of experiences by Chinese exchange students in Russia and the Netherlands during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first of these articles (Ye, 2021) aims to research how Chinese exchange students in Russia displayed their national identity in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings

indicate that the participants displayed a greater sense of national identity and national pride after their time in Russia. One factor that contributed to a greater sense of national identity among participants was that they felt they did not belong in Russia, which made them miss their home country and multiple aspects of Chinese society they deemed superior to those in Russian society, such as infrastructure and economic development.⁴⁹ Another important factor was the COVID-19 pandemic, which many participants felt was handled much better by the Chinese government than in other countries. This led to an increased sense of national pride, participants stating that “other countries should learn from China’s governance methods. After all, this time China handled it best”.⁵⁰ Despite these feelings of national pride and superiority, participants could also appreciate the advantages of Russia, admiring its architecture, relatively quiet traffic and education system.⁵¹ In seeing the positive sides of Russia, participants could also more easily admit the flaws of Chinese society, despite their increased sense of national identity and national pride.⁵²

However, what this article does not address is how the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the degree of integration by Chinese exchange students in a foreign environment, and how this consequently affects their sense of national identity. Furthermore, no mention is made of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the social interaction between Chinese students and the local population.

These questions are addressed in the next research article (Li, 2021), but in the Netherlands instead of in Russia. Similar to Jiang & Altinyelken, Li mentions that linguistic differences are one of the main obstacles for Chinese students when integrating into the Netherlands.⁵³ Li also mentions the importance of establishing friendships in the process of integration, which is similar to the approach in the 2021 research by Jiang & Altinyelken. However, in the research by Li, COVID-19 is presented as one of the main factors that negatively influenced participants’ ability to establish friendships. One of the reasons for this is that students mainly established social connections through physical classes, and the COVID-19 pandemic caused all education systems to switch to online classes.⁵⁴ Unlike in the studies performed by Hong

⁴⁹ Ye, 2021, 48

⁵⁰ Ye, 2021, 48

⁵¹ Ye, 2021, 49

⁵² Ye, 2021, 50

⁵³ Li, 2021, 44

⁵⁴ Li, 2021, 43

and Jiang & Altinyelken, participants in Li's research barely experienced any forms of prejudice or discrimination, which in turn did not negatively impact their integration into or perception of the Netherlands.⁵⁵ However, participants did mention that the expectations they had of the Netherlands differed from their real life experiences, which they felt was an obstacle in their daily life.⁵⁶ This was not mentioned in any of the other studies, and can most likely be explained by the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced Dutch society into a lockdown on multiple occasions. Li is also the first of the researchers to actively address how differences in personality can be an issue in the processes of integration and cultural adaptation. Many participants in Li's research felt they "did not have many international and local friends because of their introverted personality".⁵⁷ One final conclusion Li makes is that "without the high quality of interpersonal relationships and social support in the Netherlands, the process of adapting to the Dutch society and culture could be affected during the COVID-19 pandemic."⁵⁸ However, the research by Jiang & Altinyelken also discusses the trouble Chinese students face in establishing friendships without any mention of COVID-19. Therefore, I consider COVID-19 to be more influential in how exchange students perceive a foreign society than in the process of sociocultural integration. Previous studies, as discussed throughout this literature review, have also shown that sociocultural integration is more likely to be influenced by linguistic and cultural differences. Nonetheless, integrating into any foreign community is made more difficult when a society is forced into a state of lockdown, regardless of the national and cultural background of the outside group.

While most of the articles reviewed show how Chinese exchange students have come to view their own national identity in terms of their degree of integration, I want to investigate how the context of COVID-19 and the accompanying lockdown policies play into this. Furthermore, while previous studies focus more on how Chinese exchange students regard themselves and their national identity in a foreign environment, I also want to focus on how they have come to regard the foreign environment itself, especially in the light of a circumstance as unusual as a pandemic.

⁵⁵ Li, 2021, 38-39

⁵⁶ Li, 2021, 45

⁵⁷ Li, 2021, 48

⁵⁸ Li, 2021, 49

Research methods

This research employed qualitative research methods. In particular, I conducted interviews among 12 research participants. Convenience sampling was used as a sampling technique in the process of finding participants. Five participants were provided by a Dutch friend who reached out to six Chinese students in her major. I also reached out to SVS, the study organization for Chinastudies in Leiden. They put me in contact with ACSSNL, a student society in the Netherlands created specifically for students from China. After establishing contact with ACSSNL, they provided a total of five Chinese students who wanted to participate. The final two participants were the language partner of a fellow student from Asian Studies, and a Chinese PhD student who I got into contact with through SVS.

The interview guide consisted of 31 questions. Half of the questions are related to how the participants experienced the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands. The other questions explore how participants view the Netherlands and Dutch society, the way they view China and how they experience their Chinese identity during their time abroad. Interviews were semi-structured, and they lasted for 1.5 to 3.5 hours per participant. Length of the interviews depended on the flow of the conversation, and questions were added into the conversation as they arose naturally from topics discussed. Interview questions are added into the appendix. Interviews were performed face-to-face and through online video calls. Interviews were mainly performed in English. Parts of the conversation were performed in Mandarin when participants did not fully know how to express themselves in English when answering a specific question. These parts of the interviews were relatively short compared to the rest of the interviews, and the use of Mandarin was aided by the use of English by participants, as I could not recognize all of the grammatical structures and words they used. Because I did not recognize all of the characters used, these parts of the interviews were hard to transcribe. As a result, I have not included the Mandarin sections of the interviews in the appendix.

Interview questions have been derived from literature research, as well as personal notions on national identity in a global context. In my literary research, the biggest inspiration for interview questions has come from research articles related to Chinese students in the Netherlands. Before performing the main interviews for this research, one pilot interview was performed. The goal of this was to test the relevance of questions asked and the

informativeness of answers given, as well as whether or not the nature of some of the questions was too sensitive. Before agreeing to participate in the research, one participant indicated that he did not want to get into political subject matter. Some of the questions asked participants to actively reflect on both the Dutch government and the Chinese government, which might require the participants to get into politically sensitive subject matter. The test interview indicated that none of the questions were of too sensitive a nature for the participant who actively indicated not wanting to discuss politics. As none of the other participants made any similar statements or requests to have political topics scrapped from the interview, I concluded that none of the questions were of too sensitive a nature for any of the participants. The answers of the test interview proved both interesting and relevant, so I have included them in the analysis as well.

All research participants were from different regions spread across mainland China, and have been in the Netherlands either since before the COVID-19 pandemic started in December 2019, or came to the Netherlands between the Fall of 2020 and January 2021. One participant has been in the Netherlands since August 2018. I interviewed both Chinese students who tended to socialize more exclusively with other Chinese students, as well as Chinese students who appeared to be more integrated into the broader student community and did not only socialize with other Chinese students. The selection of these two different categories of participants was not intentional, but it did turn out beneficial for the research because it provided a more representative view of the different types of Chinese students in the Netherlands. This research, with its small scope and limited number of interviewees, does not allow us to generalize about how all Chinese people in the Netherlands view the Netherlands, Dutch society and Dutch policies on the COVID-19 pandemic. However, I do feel the inclusion of both more socially integrated Chinese participants as well as more socially secluded Chinese participants results in a more representative sample in the process of answering the research questions of my thesis.

Five of the participants had selected Cultural Anthropology as their major. The selection of these participants was not intentional, but their major did cause them to consider questions about Chinese and Dutch society from a more anthropological and academic perspective. They seemed to have a deeper understanding of and interest in Dutch society than participants with completely different study majors. I was given their contact information by a friend who also studies Cultural Anthropology. Three of these participants were close

friends, and they suggested we do a group interview. I agreed, as I was interested to see how a group interview would influence the flow of the interview, as well as the answers given and possible additional questions that might arise. This interview method proved to be both interesting and effective, in the sense that these friends could complement or inspire each other's answers in the case when someone did not know how to answer a specific question. They also corrected one another when someone felt the other person unknowingly made an incorrect statement. I also feel that the fact that these friends were interviewed together made the interview environment feel relaxed and informal, and made it easier for the participants to share more personal information. Due to the successful nature of this kind of interview, I decided to interview two other participants together as well. These two were in a relationship, and were able to complement each other's answers in detail. All other participants were interviewed separately. Besides Cultural Anthropology, other study majors included Philosophy, Education, Linguistics, Artificial Intelligence, International Studies, Business & Administration and Computer Science. All participants were either doing their Master's or PhD.

Qualitative interviews were chosen in preference to quantitative surveys. National identity, integration into a foreign community and personal opinions on a foreign society and culture can be very complex and personal matters. Due to the varied nature of these topics, participants can come up with new and different topics or angles related to the questions asked. This can, in turn, lead to new insights and eventually more detailed and thorough research data. Because of this, I chose to perform semi-structured interviews in favor of structured interviews. In the analysis, participants are given pseudonyms for the sake of anonymity. Quotes can be traced back to the transcription of the interviews, which is added in the Appendix section. Therefore, no footnotes are used in the Analysis.

Analysis: Individualism vs. collectivism, and the cases of nuance and identity

The analysis part of this thesis is divided into three sections. The first section analyzes how participants have come to view Dutch society during their time in the Netherlands. The second section analyzes how their manner of integration has helped shape their opinions. The third section analyzes how their time in the Netherlands has influenced how they view their own national identity.

1: The Netherlands and China as direct opposites

Multiple participants viewed the Netherlands and China to be direct opposites of one another on a societal and political level, as well as in the context of COVID-19 lockdown policies set by each respective government. Throughout the interviews, many participants kept emphasizing the amount of freedom they felt they had in the Netherlands, which they immediately linked to the lack of freedom they said to have experienced back in China. Participants particularly talked about having the freedom to do what they want and live their lives at their own pace. The freedom to express one's opinion was mentioned as well, but not as much as the freedom of choice they felt in living their lives. It is important to note that none of the participants had any broad knowledge about Dutch society and Dutch cultural values prior to coming to the Netherlands. Some participants mentioned that they had heard about the tolerance towards drug use and prostitution in Amsterdam, prior to coming to the Netherlands. This gave them the notion that Dutch people were "open and tolerant", without giving any other examples besides their view of Amsterdam. No concrete examples of political issues or within Dutch society were mentioned to support this view of the Netherlands having an open and tolerant society.

Opposites in terms of the pandemic

Social interaction with the local population and engaging in local cultural activities can be effective ways to acquire more familiarity with a foreign culture and society. For a lot of students, and especially international exchange students, going to physical classes can be a

great way to meet other people who might help you form and expand a social network in a foreign environment. However, as the lockdowns in the Netherlands following the COVID-19 pandemic caused all school systems to switch to online classes in favor of physical classes, one primary source of social interaction for students was cut off. Nearly all participants of this research found that the lockdown greatly impacted and limited their social life, which also heavily impacted the mental well-being of some participants, who described themselves as feeling “very lonely” and “depressed” during the first lockdown. This was especially the case for those who had little success in forming a social network prior to the lockdown. Besides causing the schools to switch from physical classes to online classes, the lockdown also forced the service industry and cultural sector to shut down. This meant that international exchange students also had very little opportunities to meet new people outside of class.

Xandra stated that “the COVID measures of the Dutch government are a way to learn more about the Netherlands”. As the lockdown closed off nearly all possibilities for international exchange students to easily expand their social network and get more acquainted with Dutch culture and the Dutch social climate, there was indeed still one area in which people could learn more about a society and draw comparisons with other societies: the lockdown measures set by a nation’s government. These lockdown measures can affect society in the sense that it can change the way how people in that society behave. To some extent, one can draw conclusions on the value a government places on liberty and economic stability based on the strictness of the lockdown regulations. Observing a population’s response to and the manner in which they deal with newly enforced lockdown regulations can also tell you something about this population and its values. Because of this, I asked all participants how they viewed the Netherlands, the Dutch government and Dutch society in light of the lockdown, its regulations and the manner in which the Dutch population responded to these matters. Some of the observations made by the participants do not correctly portray the COVID-19 situation in the Netherlands. However, the goal here is not to judge the accuracy of their observations and opinions. The goal of this research is to get a more clear idea of how Chinese exchange students viewed and experienced Dutch society during their time in the Netherlands, at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While sharing their views of the Netherlands and Dutch society during the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple participants talked about the Netherlands as a very individualistic

country. This is primarily how they made sense of Dutch society from their perspective. Mark said that, in his view, “the Netherlands has a very loose society. [...] People are not very bonded here. It’s very individualistic, especially when the pandemic happened. As a society, people are not helping each other. They’re very selfish.” He went on to say that he felt “in the Netherlands, there is no society, just a collection of separate persons. It’s more individualistic than collective. A traditional Chinese person would think of a society in a more collective way.” Boris stated that, in his opinion, “China and the Netherlands are two perfect examples of complete opposites. One is very individualist and democratic, and the other is collective and centralized.” His reasoning for this statement was that he felt Dutch people seemed to not really care about the COVID-19 virus. It shocked him that, in his eyes, Dutch people seemed to care more about themselves than the safety of others. However, as the pandemic progressed, death rates dropped and more people got vaccinated, he came to the conclusion that “maybe it’s fine to not care so much, because people are not really dying of it.”

Sara mentioned how, in China, “the power of the government is extremely strong. There is no other voice, and if the Chinese government tells you to do something, you have to do it. But in the Netherlands, the government tries more to listen to the people’s needs.” This was also mentioned by Zena, who said she “was able to understand the democratic nature of this, but thought it’s not a good thing in this situation.” She thought that “in the democratic process, it takes a long time to come to a decision. But at the point the Dutch government came to a decision, the COVID-19 situation was already much worse.” In this example, the Chinese and Dutch government are once again put against each other as being opposites.

Yennifer noted that, in dealing successfully with a troublesome situation such as a pandemic, “it requires the cooperation of the whole community. But that is the problem of a diverse environment, it is really hard to expect people from all communities to cooperate.” She saw the diverse environment that exists in the Netherlands as an obstruction in successfully containing the COVID-19 virus, and thus getting both the economy and regular society back on track as soon and efficiently as possible. This is another example of how one can learn more about a country, its culture and political climate through observing the regulations that are enforced during a lockdown, as well as through observing how the local population responds to these regulations. Several participants also mentioned the protests that some Dutch people organized against the COVID-19 regulations, which gave them the notion that Dutch people place more value on their personal freedom than on the wellbeing of the

community. Jolene found that “Dutch people maybe love freedom too much. They love their freedom more than people in other countries.” Multiple participants also said to doubt whether or not Dutch people even believe in the rules made by their government, if they even choose to follow them at all. Zena said she “thought it was very weird that, at the beginning when the Dutch government told people not to visit their grandparents, because they might die, Dutch people still did it.” She went on to say “this reflects something concerning Dutch values,” without specifying what exactly she meant by this.

Several participants also complained about the way the Dutch government and the Dutch people handled the required wearing of face masks. Dutch people were described as “crazy” and “dangerous” for not wearing their face masks. “Why are they not wearing their masks, and why are they allowing themselves and other people to get COVID? I cannot understand that.” and “Come on, people! You have to wear your face masks, it travels through the air!” “I was shocked by how nobody was taking the situation seriously. Nobody was wearing their face masks!” Wendy stated. She also told how she and her boyfriend were being “so Dutch” on summer vacation abroad by not wearing their face masks. This indicates that not wearing a face mask is closely associated with being Dutch, in her view. Participants also mentioned how people in China always wear a face mask. Jolene was discriminated against for wearing her face mask during the first couple of months of the lockdown, when the wearing of face masks was not required yet. She could not understand this, because she thought Dutch people placed such value on personal freedom. Almost all participants saw the unwillingness to wear a face mask as a sign that Dutch people valued their personal freedom more than the safety of others. This is another example of how China and the Netherlands are being presented as direct opposites. Once again, the Netherlands is presented as being an individualist society where people do whatever they want, whereas China is considered to have a collectivist society where people always keep the common good at the front and center of their actions.

However, nobody seemed to have the clear opinion that the Chinese way of dealing with the pandemic was superior to how the Netherlands dealt with it. Some people even openly criticized how the Chinese government dealt with the pandemic. It was described by many as being “too extreme, with too many restrictions.” Some called it “overreacting”. Regarding the situation in the Netherlands, Mark noted that “if we look at the numbers, the statistics are awful. Judging by the numbers, China did a better job than the Netherlands.” Participants described the Dutch policies as being “chaotic”, “unclear”, “very temporary and very

extreme”. Jackson noted how he felt that “it seemed like the Dutch government changed their mind every other week.” Mark shared this view, as he felt that “every month it changes again, and there are minor variations on rules all the time.”, or Burt who felt “that everytime they come up with new regulations, nothing really changes.” Wendy said she “used to have really strong faith in the Dutch government and in how they would handle a crisis situation like this. But after the pandemic, I do feel they are not as capable as I imagined. They could have done a lot more.” Multiple participants also mentioned how the Chinese government aimed for a “zero case infection policy”, stating that “1 and 0 are completely different numbers, 1 and 100 are very similar”. Lori mentioned how “if there is one case in China, that will be a very big deal. But the government in the Netherlands is very relaxed, and they’re okay with everything.” Regardless of the abovementioned criticisms, all participants expressed to feel very happy with the amount of freedom they experienced in the Netherlands. Aside from the worry that the participants felt regarding some Dutch people not wearing their face masks, almost all participants saw the benefit of having more freedom during the time of a pandemic. Examples include the ability to go on vacation, or the chance to physically meet up with other people and undertake fun activities in public places.

Opposites on a general level

As mentioned earlier, participants also posed the Netherlands and China as direct opposites outside of the context of COVID-19. The straightforward nature of Dutch people was mentioned by many, Jackson stating how “in the Netherlands, business is just about doing business, but in China, it’s much more complex”. Multiple participants felt they could do whatever they wanted in the Netherlands without anyone judging them, while back in China everyone always has to follow the rules and be like everyone else. The overall levels of tolerance and diversity were also said to be completely opposite in the Netherlands and China. “In the Netherlands, you are free to do what you want,” Sara said. Participants also mentioned how Dutch people greatly value their privacy, while they felt in China “you have no privacy.”

Aside from sociocultural pressure and personal freedom being completely different in the Netherlands and China, many participants also talked about economic pressure. Life in China was described as “fast, and people were always pressured into doing a lot of things”, whereas life in the Netherlands was described as being “slow and peaceful, and people can follow

their own flow more easily.” Jolene posed the Netherlands and China as complete opposites in the context of the labor market. She said that “in China, you have to work really hard. But in the Netherlands, you can just lie down and do what you want.” Because she viewed the Netherlands as such a developed country, she had the notion that you can pick any job you would like, and still make a good salary. Her view was that back in China, “only the people who cannot have a better job will be a delivery man. But in the Netherlands, you can just be a delivery man, if you want to. Because in the Netherlands, the salaries of a delivery man and a professor are similar.” The participant in question did not have a lot of interaction with Dutch people, and acknowledged she did not have any further in-depth knowledge on Dutch society or the Dutch labor market, later saying she might not understand Dutch society as well as she thought she did. Nonetheless, she still held this very convinced notion that the Dutch labor market allows for complete freedom, and will ensure that people in a lower-demanding job are paid equally to people in more demanding jobs. She based this view mainly on her notion that Dutch and Chinese society are complete opposites of one another, indicating that she was very convinced of this notion. This brings me to my next point, namely that of integration.

2. Integration and nuance

Chinese students who seemed to be more integrated in the Dutch or international community had more nuanced opinions on Dutch society than Chinese students who mainly socialized with other Chinese people. In the process of getting familiar with a foreign culture, and acquiring more information about and a deeper understanding of this culture, social integration is an important factor. While it is still possible to learn more about a foreign culture and community without becoming a part of that community or establishing any social contact with anyone belonging natively to that community, the process of socially integrating does help in acquiring more knowledge and a deeper understanding of this foreign culture. This became apparent in the interviews performed, as participants who claimed to be more integrated into the Dutch and international communities had more nuanced opinions and more accurate knowledge about Dutch culture and society than participants who mainly socialized with other Chinese people. One example is the participant at the end of the previous subchapter, Jolene, who believed a delivery man and a professor earn the same salary in the Netherlands. She said to not have a lot of friends aside from her Chinese friends, yet she said she wanted to make more Dutch friends and learn more about Dutch culture. But

when she was invited to a party by some of the Dutch people in her building, she did not feel comfortable joining as she was not used to this kind of interaction. She also especially did not feel comfortable going to a party during the COVID-19 pandemic. Multiple participants mentioned how Dutch people enjoy partying and openly talking to strangers on a casual level much more than Chinese people do. Boris, who said to socialize more with international people, mentioned that he does not “know what the social code is here”, and that he does not “really go to parties, which is where most Dutch people like to socialize.” In contrast, Burt, who felt really at home in the Netherlands and had many Dutch friends, said that he thinks “it’s easier to connect to Dutch people than to Chinese people. At a party, Chinese people think it’s so weird if you talk to them. But in the Netherlands, it’s so normal.” These three participants all mentioned how Dutch people like to socialize at parties. However, two of them said to not feel comfortable in this setting. This shows how what they construe as a typical Dutch social setting can be an obstacle for them in the process of sociocultural integration, due to differences in social codes and activity preferences.

Xandra posed another interesting example of integration and more nuanced opinions about the Netherlands, as she had the opinion that “Dutch people do not really seem to be afraid of dying”. She claimed to have few non-Chinese friends, while at the same time she seemed to have a more critical view of China than Chinese people who tend to stick inside their Chinese social circle. She also said she did not know a lot about Dutch society. Despite this lack of knowledge on Dutch society, she still felt she could say that an entire population did “not really seem to be afraid of dying”.

Participants who seemed to be more integrated into Dutch society, or distanced themselves more from other Chinese people, made a couple of very interesting and complex observations that seemed to indicate that they have more complex opinions on Dutch society than participants who did not socialize with a lot of non-Chinese people. One example of this is Mark, who said that “in the Netherlands, there is no society, just a collection of separate persons.” He also said that “a traditional Chinese person would think of a society in a more collective way”. By saying this, he claims to not be what he considers a traditional Chinese person. He went on to state that he preferred not to socialize with any other Chinese people in the Netherlands. When he got invited to join a WeChat group for all Chinese students in Leiden, he just thought “why would I want to join a group with a thousand people I don’t know?”, indicating that he placed more importance on the fact that all of these people are

strangers than the fact that they are Chinese. While his observation that the Netherlands does not have a society, only a collection of individuals, may not necessarily be accurate, it is a more thought-out and complex observation than someone who states that all Dutch people are crazy for not wearing their face masks. The latter statement was made by Jolene, a participant who mostly socialized with other Chinese people. This seems to indicate that participants who actively seek out non-Chinese friends challenge themselves to think more critically about Dutch society than participants who mainly socialize with other Chinese people. This might be due to the fact that a group of Chinese people mainly like to converse about topics related to their group, as was the case with Jolene. She stated that she never talked about the Netherlands and Dutch society with her Chinese friends. Mark actively sought out contact with Dutch people, and enjoyed participating in conversations about Dutch society with them.

An example of more nuanced observations made by participants who seemed to be more socially active in Dutch and international communities is the criticism that the COVID-19 regulations in the Netherlands were very temporary. Participants who said the regulations to be very “temporary” and felt the Dutch government “changed their mind every week” all had a lot of Dutch or international friends. One participant also recognized the pattern of regulations becoming more strict in the second half of 2020 and 2021, only for them to gradually loosen up in the first half of 2021 and 2022 and then become more strict again after the summer.

One final example I want to bring up is that of Yennifer, who did not have many Dutch friends, but did have a lot of international friends. It is difficult to say whether or not she felt like she was integrated into the Dutch community, but by making friends with a lot of other international students, she shied away from only socializing with other Chinese people. She made the observation that “it is very interesting how the Netherlands has a lot of rural areas where people hold very conservative views, but at the same time a lot of tolerant policies are conducted in the Netherlands that relate to sex workers and marijuana.” None of the participants who said to mainly socialize with Chinese people had made such observations that propose a contradiction within Dutch society. As mentioned earlier, Jolene, who only socialized with her Chinese friends, claimed they never talked about Dutch people or Dutch society with one another. This shows how the manner of integration can change the way you look at the community you may or may not have integrated into.

3. The role of Chinese identity

Multiple participants viewed their own Chinese identity differently after having spent time in the Netherlands. One's identity, both personal and national, influences how you view your own country and other cultures. Identity also influences the manner in which you feel to belong to a country, either a foreign country or the one you were born and raised in. As I displayed in the previous subchapter, the degree of integration into a foreign community also influences how you regard this community. The degree of integration is partly influenced by your identity. Because of this, I want to use this final part of the analysis to discuss the concept of Chinese identity, in terms of how the participants value their own Chinese identity in Dutch society, how they view the concept of Chinese identity and how their time in the Netherlands has changed the way they view their own identity.

Multiple participants indicated that they chose to study abroad precisely because of how they view China. They ended up finding the Netherlands to be an excellent choice for them, as they said this country is the opposite of China in terms of tolerance and freedom. This indicates that there is something about China that they feel does not resonate with their own values. They can identify more easily with the sociocultural environment of the Netherlands, which they feel has more freedom and tolerance than China. Not every participant identified with their country or government all that much. Some even openly criticized the state of politics back home, and did not want to be associated with that as a Chinese person.

However, participants placed their national government close to their national identity during the interviews. Zena said that "you are somewhat representative of what your government is doing". Boris felt "ashamed" of what his country was doing, and he felt to be "caught in the middle of this struggle", between himself and his government. Zena followed that by saying "in China, people think you are not really Chinese if you don't agree with what the government is doing". She went on to say that "you can't really distinguish the Chinese country, government and culture. They're all the same thing." While she acknowledged the existence of this definition of Chinese national identity, she still said she came to the Netherlands because she did not identify with this perception of national identity. In other words, she could not identify with the way she felt most people in China view Chinese national identity. Not all participants drew a direct line between Chinese identity and the Chinese government. Some were in favor of using the term "cultural identity" instead of

“national identity” to describe their identity as a Chinese person, as they thought one’s national identity is more related to one’s government, while a cultural identity is more related to the cultural practices and cultural heritage that a nation’s population share with one another. Wendy and Burt, who were interviewed together, said they only stopped identifying with their government after coming to the Netherlands. They said: “Before, we saw ourselves a lot more as being part of our government. But after coming to the Netherlands, we can see ourselves more separately from our government. We love our country. We love being Chinese. Because of our culture, not because of our government.” Wendy went on to say that she has now “created her own image of what it means to be Chinese.” It is interesting that a lot of the participants acknowledged that, especially for Chinese people, one’s government is a part of one’s national identity. Before coming to the Netherlands, they even stated that it’s hard to separate your government from your national identity, as I described earlier. But after coming to the Netherlands, they gradually changed how they viewed the concept of national identity, as well as how they came to view their own Chinese identity.

Several participants also made a clear distinction between themselves, and other Chinese exchange students in the Netherlands. Zena said she feels “the identity of Chinese students in the Netherlands is very ‘Chinese’. When they come to a foreign country, they separate themselves from non-Chinese very strongly. They refer to all people who are not Chinese as ‘waiguoren’, which means foreigner, even though they themselves are the foreigners in that country. They still keep centralizing themselves.” What is important in this quote is that Zena very clearly distinguishes between herself and other Chinese students, indicating that she does not identify with what she perceives to be a very typical characteristic of Chinese exchange students, and perhaps Chinese people in general. The phenomenon of Chinese people in the Netherlands referring to non-Chinese as ‘waiguoren’ was mentioned by multiple participants.

Half of the participants were very aware of their Chinese identity when reflecting on their place in Dutch society, while others did not consider it at all. Jolene felt her Chinese identity was a big obstacle in trying to make Dutch friends, and she felt she could not really integrate in the Netherlands because Dutch people will always look at her “Asian face”, and never consider her to be a “real Western person”. This is in stark contrast to Ben, who lives with two other students from Italy and Croatia. He said he feels he does not “have a different social position compared to them, as an exchange student”. “I did not feel any problems

while making friends or social connections because I'm Chinese. My identity did not affect my social life at all", Jackson said. In terms of how the participants think Dutch people perceive them as Chinese people, participants mentioned how "Dutch people have certain expectations regarding Chinese identity", and how "Chinese are put in an 'exotic' position because they are so 'different'". Wendy was aware of the expectations and stereotypes other people have regarding Chinese identity, yet she "took this as an advantage", and used her own identity as a Chinese person to "break the stereotypes". This made her feel more proud of her identity, and also proud of making other people change the way they look at Chinese people in general, implying a sense of accomplishment towards all Chinese people.

Several participants said to feel proud of their country and of being Chinese, even more so after having come to the Netherlands. This is in part because of how they could finally see themselves separately from the government they did not want to be associated with, allowing them to focus more on the other aspects of what it means to be Chinese. In a sense, being in the Netherlands caused them to feel "more Chinese", as they could completely embrace all positive aspects they consider to be a part of Chinese identity. Two participants, Mark and Jolene, said to feel proud of their country and of their government, without mentioning that they saw themselves separately from their government. They acknowledged what they considered to be shortcomings in their country, but still had feelings of pride. "There is nothing bad about being Chinese," Mark said. Jolene felt extremely proud about how much more powerful she felt China has become in recent years, both culturally and economically. She also emphasized how much stronger the status of China in the international community had become in recent years. "It's a fact", she repeated twice. She also felt all Chinese people "were being treated much better than before by local people in other countries". She ended with saying: "I'm proud of being Chinese even though there are a lot of problems in Chinese society, and a lot of problems the Chinese people and government should do something about. But I still believe that being Chinese is great."

Half of the participants also made a clear distinction between feeling Asian and feeling Chinese during their time in the Netherlands. "When we go abroad, we're not Chinese. We're all Asian people", Burt said. "In China, I was very aware of the fact that I am Chinese. When I came here, I realized I have the bigger label 'Asian' attached to me. First I am Asian, then I am Chinese," Boris noted. Participants also felt their direct surroundings influenced how they

identified themselves, some feeling more Asian in a white dominant group yet more Chinese when surrounded by other Asians, while other participants had the exact opposite.

Conclusion

This research has shown that many of the interviewed Chinese exchange students have come to view China and the Netherlands as being direct opposites of one another. Freedom and tolerance were posed as important factors in the shaping of this view. Whereas China was posed as being “collective and centralized”, the Netherlands was viewed as “very individualistic and democratic”, which one participant took as far as saying that the Netherlands has no society, just a collection of separate persons. Economic pressure was also used as an example of how China and the Netherlands are opposites, as participants felt you could just do whatever you wanted and still make a good living. Not only did participants view China and the Netherlands as opposites of one another in terms of personal freedom and absence of economic pressure, but they also saw the manner in which the Dutch and Chinese governments dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic as being opposite. Participants felt the Dutch government was “okay with everything” and tried to “listen to other people’s opinions”, whereas participants felt in China “there is only one voice, and if the Chinese government tells you to do something, you must listen”. Only one participant outright said that the Chinese government did a better job than the Netherlands, judging only by the infection rates. Multiple participants outright criticized the loose and unclear way in which the Dutch government dealt with the pandemic, yet others valued the personal freedom they retained in these loose policies more highly than low infection rates.

While the pandemic and lockdown negatively affected everyone's social lives and ability to integrate, participants who said to have trouble connecting with non-Asian people felt this was mainly due to cultural differences, and not because of the lockdown. Participants who claimed to be more integrated into the Dutch and/or international communities, or at least also socialized with non-Asian friends, seemed to have more informed and nuanced opinions on Dutch society and the COVID-19 lockdown policies set by the Dutch government. These participants actively challenged themselves to think critically about Dutch society and analyze the COVID-19 policies set by the Dutch government in more depth. Participants who said to mainly socialize with other Chinese people had little opinions on Dutch society and the lockdown policies in the Netherlands. They mainly talked with their Chinese friends about subjects related to their social group.

The findings of this research indicate that their time in the Netherlands has changed the way participants view their national identity as a Chinese person. Overall, participants became more aware and more proud of their national identity after coming to the Netherlands. Being separated from the government not every participant wanted to be associated with, allowed them to view their national identity as a Chinese person separately from their government, and create their own sense of what it means to be Chinese. As a result, this caused them to feel more proud of their Chinese national identity. In the research articles discussed in the literature review, participants also experienced increased feelings of pride towards China, but mainly towards their government and country as a whole, instead of towards themselves as Chinese individuals. None of the participants felt discriminated against or had any notable negative experiences with Dutch people. Some participants even preferred socializing with Dutch people, and could identify more with the way Dutch people interact with one another. None of the participants considered themselves to have a 'Dutch' or international identity. They also did not claim to have multiple or combined national identities as posed in the research by Raffaetà. However, the participants in this research did feel more aware of their Chinese identity during their time in the Netherlands. Their time outside of China also made them more aware of their Asian identity, which they even felt was stronger than their Chinese identity depending on the surrounding company at that moment.

When we look at how Chinese exchange students regard their Chinese identity in a foreign environment and position themselves in that environment, we see an interesting contrast between the collected data and the findings of the article by Raffaetà et.al., as the participants of that research seemed to consider themselves to be more 'other' in the Italian community. The data collected in this thesis suggests that most Chinese students in the Netherlands still centralize themselves and refer to all non-Chinese as 'waiguoren', as multiple participants who did not do so themselves mentioned how other Chinese students do think in this way. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the participants in the research by Raffaetà et.al. had all migrated to Italy for an undecided time, and the exchange students who still centralize themselves in a foreign environment will go back to their home environment after a fixed period of time and thus have the 'luxury' to centralize themselves.

In conclusion, Chinese exchange students have come to view the Netherlands and Dutch society as being the opposite of China, both in terms of sociopolitical climate as well as the manner in which the respective governments dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic. The

backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the development of this view, as it showed how Dutch people responded to the situation in an entirely different manner than most Chinese people would have reacted. Participants have gotten the view that Dutch people value their personal freedom more highly than the safety of others, and the behavior of Dutch people witnessed by the participants reinforced the notion that Dutch society is highly individualistic rather than collectivistic. However, multiple participants said to have left China and come to the tolerant environment of the Netherlands precisely because they do not fully identify with the collectivistic nature of Chinese society. Being exposed to what participants considered to be a more individualistic, tolerant and open environment than back in China allowed them to view their national identity differently and made it possible to create their own definition of what it means to 'be Chinese'. This, in turn, made them feel more proud of their national identity, which they could now see separately from their government, but felt was more centered around themselves and the cultural heritage shared with other Chinese people. While this study does not allow us to generalize and say these conclusions are applicable to all Chinese students in the Netherlands, it does show how being exposed to an environment considered to be more individualistic, tolerant and open than that of China can affect the way Chinese people regard their national identity. Furthermore, it is also because of their Chinese identity and being used to the more collective nature of China that participants regard Dutch society to be so open and tolerant. As one participant said, "in the Netherlands, you are free to do what you want."

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Appendix

Interview questions

1. How long have you lived in the Netherlands, and when did you come here?
2. Why did you choose the Netherlands as your country of exchange?
3. What expectations did you have when coming here? How were these expectations influenced by the pandemic?
4. How different was the Netherlands from what you expected?
5. What is your social network like in the Netherlands? What expectations did you have concerning your social life, and how was this influenced by the pandemic?
6. Did you want to go back home when the first lockdown started?
7. How do you feel the Dutch government has handled the pandemic?
8. How do the regulations here differ from those in China, in your opinion?
9. To what extent did you understand and follow the lockdown regulations?
10. How do you feel these regulations were communicated to you as a foreign exchange student?
11. Were you at all times aware of the COVID situation in the Netherlands, and how did you acquire this information?
12. How do you feel the government could improve the way in which they communicate the regulations to foreign exchange students?
13. How did social distancing influence your preference in social contacts? For example, did it cause you to grow more attached to Dutch contacts, or Chinese friends in the Netherlands? Or did you have more contact with friends and family back home?
14. What were the most challenging things you encountered in your day to day life?
15. Do you feel a strong wish to connect with Dutch people overall, and why?
16. Did you think Dutch people were very open minded, and easy to connect with?
17. How do you feel Dutch people overall responded to the lockdown and its regulations? Were you surprised in any way by the manner in which Dutch people responded to the regulations?
18. Which specific covid-related regulation surprised you the most, and why?

19. Did you have covid yourself, and if so, what was it like? How was your daily life influenced by it?
20. How has the lockdown and social distancing influenced your study performance?
21. How has the lockdown and social distancing influenced your overall mental wellbeing?
22. Were there any stigmas or was there any discrimination towards you as a Chinese exchange student during the pandemic in the Netherlands?
23. How do you feel your identity and origin in China influence your social position here in the Netherlands? Do you feel your social position is very different from that of exchange students of different nationalities?
24. Do you think there exists such a thing as a “Chinese identity”, and did your stay here make you feel more aware of this identity, being a foreign exchange student?
25. How would you define “Chinese identity”?
26. Are you defined more as an “Asian student” by people here, or a “Chinese student”?
27. Did your stay here in any way change the way you view China as a whole, and your direct local environment back home? Did it influence your own morals and values that you grew up with back home?
28. What view do you have of the Netherlands? Was this view influenced by the pandemic, and if so in what way? Did this view change in any other way during your stay in the Netherlands?
29. What do you think are the most important differences between the Netherlands and China, both as a country and on the level of cultural values and traditions?
30. What is the most interesting conversation you've had with a Dutch person?
31. Would you recommend the Netherlands to your friends back home as a good choice for studying abroad?

Transcription of interviews

First interview: Mark

1. How long have you lived in the Netherlands, and when did you arrive here?

Well, three years, I don't remember the exact date, but summer of 2019.

And you were here when the pandemic started?

Yes, for the entire period.

You did not go back home?

Yeah, last year, but not during the worst moments.

Was it very difficult coming back here, or did you have to go in quarantine?

Yeah, quarantine, which is fine. I would say the financial problem is bigger, because the flight ticket is really really expensive. Normally it takes 300 euros for a one way ticket to Europe, and now it's like 1200. And this is the cheapest price, if you take other airlines like British Airlines or Lufthava they can be triple that.

Can I ask where you are from in China?

Yeah, my mom is from Shanghai, and my dad has more an eastern background.

2. What expectations did you have when you came to the Netherlands, and why did you choose the Netherlands?

Interesting question. I moved to the Netherlands from the States, and I lived there for three years before I moved to the Netherlands. There were more political issues in America, that made me feel supersad, and the education environment wasn't really in favor of Chinese students. So I thought, yeah, I'm gonna change my environment. And once, when I was younger as a tourist in Europe, I looked at some universities here. And the Netherlands was my first choice in Europe, but not my first choice globally, mainly because of the language. I didn't really want to learn Dutch in the first place.

Do you speak a little bit of Dutch?

Yes. I would say reading is better than speaking. I read a lot of words already, but I can't really make conversation.

It must be difficult to learn.

Yeah, hard to practice, actually. And the university doesn't really offer proper courses, it's a problem.

Your English is quite good, almost like a native speaker.

Thank you. My English actually improved a lot. I actually started to study English in America, but many of the English words were very localized, not very academic or formal enough.

And it must help that the English level is very high here, among Dutch students.

Right, and also we have English writing courses specially for students, so we kind of have to learn writing again.

And you mentioned that the Netherlands was your first choice in Europe. Why is that?

First of all, the English environment is much better than other countries, even the UK. Just the society, and people's mindsets, it's different. The environment in the Netherlands, not only the nature, but also cultural... I study cultural anthropology, so I would appreciate more cultural aspects. I do have a little bit of bias towards many languages, obviously, like Spanish or German, it doesn't make any sense but they don't have my priority. And I think I made the right choice, in coming here.

That's good to hear. And you still think this way?

Yes, I'm even thinking of staying here longer, even after graduation.

3. How did the whole lockdown influence your expectation of studying here?

Well, actually, for studying itself, it hasn't changed much. But my mindset and mentality changed a lot, since I really didn't have friends. I just arrived here for a couple of months, and then all of my friends from the first year were gone, because they all went home, and I didn't know any Dutch students because we used English for our education, not Dutch, so I didn't have any friends here, which made my study experience worse. But as for studying itself, reading, following courses online, doing exercises, it was not bad, actually. Professors were quite helpful with online studying. So it's more mentality and social life that got influenced.

4. Did you want to go back home to China when the first lockdown started, and everything went crazy all over the world?

Actually, not really, because in America I experienced even worse things than the pandemic. Something I couldn't even tell my parents. Even the life there is hard. You know, I'd been living alone a long time since the second year of middle school, so a lot of things I couldn't tell my parents, aside from letting them know that I could overcome a lot of the difficulties. So no, I wasn't planning on going home.

5. So, what is your social life like here, in the Netherlands, at this moment?

Very little. I'm actually not a very shy person, I'm actually quite straightforward. Maybe you can feel that a little bit, in our whatsapp conversation, sometimes I'm really not answering a lot, it doesn't mean I don't want to, it just means I'm bad at typing things, I'm bad at contacting people through written words. Also, I use no Facebook or Twitter, Instagram a little bit, so no social life online.

Yeah, in my opinion the less of that, the better.

Yeah, I sometimes think the same way. I do play some online games, but I feel there are toxic people in the online gaming environment. Most of the time, I just mute all microphones.

And was this influenced by the pandemic at all, your social life here, or was there not much of a difference?

Yes, it's actually a little bit different than before. Even in America, my general experience wasn't good enough. I still had some friends from the same studies, or who lived in the same community blocks. We met in the community hall, and we couldn't meet everyday. If we could hang out, we would cook together. But here, there's no chance, except for my landlord's family. The pandemic really changed social life, for the worse. Also, I played football before, and now no football club actually accepts me anymore, because at first they only closed for really high level players. Those players are either not local, or are very popular among the community. Some of them are playing in the 3rd or 4th league. So we as international players are not supported anymore or given preference to. Also, I work for a sports media company. I used to go to a lot of football and volleyball games, writing as a journalist, writing match news, taking some photos. But I couldn't make friends with other people's media crews.

Do you have a group of friends here, in the Netherlands, in Leiden?

In Leiden, people I can call friends are not too many, actually. Most of them are, let's say, familiar people, but not in the stage where our lives are intertwined much. We know each other, are quite familiar with each other, and they're good people. But nothing else.

Would you like to expand your social network here in the Netherlands?

For sure. In this scenario, I would say it's really weird. I make less friends in university, but I make more friends with older people, like my grandparents generation. Maybe it's because of my landlord, I spent a lot of time with him during the first lockdown. He actually introduced me to some of his friends, like some retired people. They have a lot of time and get bored, so they've taught me a lot.

They're all Dutch, or of immigrant background Dutch. They taught me a lot about the Netherlands, and also some handy skills. Like, how to drive a boat, how to check your car's engine, how to build a wooden engine, stuff like that. Things most students won't get from the student life.

Would you like to make more Dutch friends while staying here, or more international friends?

I would appreciate more Dutch people as friends, but I'm open to things. As I plan on staying here longer, I would say the more Dutch, the better.

What's been your experience interacting with your Dutch peers, up to this point?

All of them are very nice. I haven't had any Dutch people be annoying or rude. Sometimes, they are even more straightforward than me.

Yeah, that's what Dutch people are generally known for, very straight to the point. I read another research article, about social integration of Chinese students in the Netherlands. A lot of them have had a very hard time accepting the Dutch nature of being very straightforward. They considered it rude, or harmful.

Yeah, I could think of some cases wherein Dutch people act in this way, but I know they have no bad intentions. At least, some people in the bar do not. They're probably just drunk.

6. So, how do you feel the Dutch government has handled the pandemic in general?

Well, if we look at the numbers, the statistics are awful. From my own experience, some things can be improved. For example, I do think the quarantine restrictions for the quarantined people can be stricter. For example, if they are tested positive, I think the government should force them to not go anywhere, instead of being allowed to still go outside under certain conditions. I also think the government can provide more help to the people who are in quarantine. As for hospitals, I haven't been to any hospitals due to corona reasons, so I don't know what it's like there. Just the general rules for when people get COVID can be stricter.

7. And how do the regulations differ from those in China?

I didn't really know much about the situation in China, but from what I heard they are more serious there if anyone gets COVID, so in China they're like "We should be completely COVID-free", but here in the Netherlands it's more like "so long as people are healthy, we feel like COVID is not that big of a deal, and people can live their normal lives". But yeah, it works here, at least, all the societies are running, except mostly for shop owners and restaurant owners. But generally, the economy and education are still running. So all in all, it's not too bad here, no mass cases of people getting sick or dying, or some contamination that got crazy.

8. Were you very aware of what the situation was like back home?

Yeah, very aware, actually. Because my parents always updated me about it, I passively acquired information concerning the situation back home. Personally, I'm not interested in actively keeping track of the development every day. Like, last weekend, there were new regulations, and I was not aware. Suddenly, my colleagues said they were changing their weekend plans because they suddenly could do group activities. I did not know at all. The less I know, the more peace I have in my head.

9. So, my view of the whole pandemic in China is that only a couple of cities got locked down completely, and it was pretty much contained. What do you know about this?

Well, for most of the Chinese cities, if they discover a case, they lock down a certain district. None of my friends or parents were ever locked down, except for in the first lockdown. I think most of the new cases are found near airports. As soon as they discover a case, it's a hard lockdown and they do mass tests, like half a million people get 3 tests in 3 days. Judging by the numbers, I'd say China did a

better job than the Netherlands. Last time when I went home, a few months ago, I just got taken to quarantine right after I got to the airport, and it wasn't even far from the airport. And there were a lot of foreigners in the same hotel, quarantined for 14 days. Afterwards, they take me to the local train station by ambulance, to make sure you don't go anywhere else except home. They handled it very well, the staff was very friendly and were not forceful.

10. How do you feel all the enforced lockdown regulations were communicated to you as a foreign exchange student?

Very little, actually. Most of the rules I heard through my colleagues, and they are mostly Dutch. I think very few foreigners have any firsthand information. I think my suggestion is maybe the government can provide text message information to all phone numbers in the Netherlands. Like the Amber alert system.

11. Do you feel you were aware enough to be able to follow all the enforced regulations?

At the beginning, yes, but now I feel it's all very chaotic and not tightly defined. Every month it changes again, and we have minor variations on rules all the time, and sometimes it's hard to follow and keep track of.

Did this ever lead to difficult situations in your daily life?

Yes, I went to Belgium once, and I could cross the border to Belgium just fine, but coming back was more difficult, because I am not a Dutch citizen while I do live in the Netherlands. So I had to provide test results to be able to go back. I thought this was very weird. But that happened only once, nothing else.

12. Did social distancing cause you to grow more attached to Dutch contacts or Chinese friends here in the Netherlands? Or did you have more contact with friends and family back home?

Well, I don't really have any Chinese friends here in the Netherlands. I have a Chinese guy in my studies who asked me why I wasn't in the group. "What group?" He told me there's a chat group for all Chinese students in Leiden from all faculties, and he asked me if I wanted to join, and I told him "...nah". I don't want to join a group with a thousand people I don't know. So, yeah, I don't have any Chinese friends here. Most of my contacts are through my landlord. I live in the South of Leiden, near de Vlietlanden. I live in a farmhouse. There are several houses on the same farm, and I would say the people who live there are my best friends here. Concerning contacts back home, I didn't contact them much because I didn't want them to get home. If something important happened, I would give them an update. So not too much.

13. How do you feel Dutch people responded to the lockdown and the regulations?

In my street, there's two extremes. My landlord's family doesn't care that much, and they don't feel like they can do that much and just accept their fate. But one of the neighbors is much more paranoid, follows every rule very strictly and is very aware of who he comes into contact with, and always says "no no no, don't get too close!". As for classmates, their opinion is they should follow all the rules.

14. How has the lockdown and social distancing influenced your study performance?

Certain subjects I really struggled with, like statistics. I really need a lot of interaction with the professor and my peers for that course, and social distancing really limited my options for interaction and having regular conversations, or asking questions. Other subjects that I am good at, it was no big deal.

15. Were there any stigmas or forms of discrimination towards you as a Chinese student because of the pandemic?

Yes, two sad stories. Both happened in the first months of the pandemic. One time, a stranger spit on my car and said something really bad to me. Another case is, on the same street, a guy approached me on the bike, and I wanted to greet him but he looked away in disgust.

That's awful. But in general, do you feel very comfortable in the Netherlands?

Yes, those two cases were extreme. I don't consider those cases to be representative of the situation here, they're just bad people.

16. Lastly, what view do you have of the Netherlands as a country, as a society, and how do you view Dutch people?

It's a very loose society, in my view. From an anthropological perspective, my thoughts could be wrong, but I think people are not very bonded here, it's very individualistic, especially when the pandemic happened. As a society, people are not helping each other, they're very selfish. But in general, if something happens against exterior forces, Dutch people can be quite united. Like, when I see a Dutch person, I know "okay, he's Dutch". But what is Dutch society? I feel there is no society, just a collection of separate persons. So more individualistic than collective. A traditional Chinese person would think of a society in this way.

Do you have any specific examples that made you think this way?

Yes, and I will again use my farm living area. When a difficult situation like COVID happened, you'd think people would help each other to make things better, especially in a small circle like that. But people were more like "you do your thing, I do mine, don't get too close to me". Feels a little bit distant and cold. Sometimes money or contracts can play a more important role than actual relationships. There's less warmth there, but I understand and do not complain.

Is this very different from American people? Because they can be even more individualistic.

Yes, American individualism can be much more radical, also with politics and religion. Most of my old university hall residents were very religious. As long as you don't mention your own religious beliefs, you can have a normal conversation. Same goes for politics. That can quickly cause problems. But there are no issues in daily life subjects. I think that's worse than in the Netherlands, because people here can still make the best of people. I also feel there is more distance in the Netherlands, for example I don't feel like I can become a part of a family household, just an attachment, but in China you actually become a family member for example when you marry someone.

And did you have this view before you came here, after you came here, or after the pandemic?

After a couple of months when I came here, before the pandemic, I already realized how Dutch people are. And I got used to this pretty quickly, and started treating Dutch people in the same way, because that's just how it goes here.

Second interview: Ben

1. How long have you lived here in the Netherlands?

About 2.5 years. I came here about september 2019, half a year before COVID started.

2. Why did you choose the Netherlands as your country of exchange?

Well, I knew I wanted to study anthropology. And the Netherlands was the only country that offered an English program, besides Ireland. But the UK is far too expensive for me. Other countries only offered the program in their own language.

3. What general view did you have of the Netherlands before coming here? Besides, the English lectures and cheaper prices.

Well, I knew the Netherlands for its marijuana. Besides that, it's just a nice place and peaceful, small country. I also didn't expect I would stay here for this long, when COVID broke out. I have to say I didn't think about it that much. It was just "Oh, the Netherlands, cool, it looks like a peaceful place, let's go there".

And this is your first time here, right?

Correct.

Have you ever gone on exchange before?

Not really an exchange, but a school trip to Tokyo. I stayed there for a couple of months.

What about other travels through Europe?

No, not yet.

4. What were your general expectations of your life here?

I didn't think too much about it. I wanted to see what would happen, see it as an adventure. Because no matter how detailed you think about it, things will always be different from what you expect.

5. When the lockdown first started in March 2020, what did you feel? Did you panic and wanted to go back home as soon as possible?

Well, because lockdowns happened before in China, I already saw all the news and cities being locked down. That prepared me, and made me realize it was going to happen in the Netherlands sooner or later. I didn't go back to China because I was afraid I would get locked out, and would not be able to come back to the Netherlands. When the lockdown happened in the Netherlands, I did not think it would last this long, I thought it would be over in half a year. I did not go back at all during my time here. I think I will graduate this summer, and maybe I will go back to China then? The situation is still very serious about the pandemic though, so I'm not sure yet. Forced quarantines are very serious there, and the government is very cautious about letting people into the country. For example, my winter vacation was for one month. If I were to choose to go back to China, I would have to be in quarantine for 28 days. So my entire vacation would be spent in quarantine.

And what is the current COVID situation like in China, to your knowledge? Because as far as I know, COVID is completely gone in China.

Well, officially, there are still lockdown policies. There are basically no infection cases in China, but once only a single case is discovered, they respond to it very seriously, and half a city will be locked down, and millions of people will get tested in a matter of days. In my opinion, they are overreacting a bit. I mean, corona is not that deadly a virus. The government is also tracking the person who might be the one who carries the virus with him when he enters the country, and they check your personal information. I don't wanna be that guy.

I can imagine. Are you in contact with people back home, at the moment?

Yeah. My parents, my friends, my family. But because of the time difference it's a bit awkward. I always plan my phone calls carefully.

6. What's your social network like in the Netherlands?

Mainly my classmates. I also joined a fencing club. Some Dutch people. Some international students. I also know some people from anarchy political communities. I know a lot of them, and they are mostly Dutch.

What is your housing situation like?

I live with two international students. We have our own room, and a shared common room. We get along fine, but I still feel a bit isolated because of our own rooms. One is Italian, one is Croatian. I don't feel like I have a different social position compared to them, as an exchange student. Because I've been here for such a long time, I already know a lot of places here in Leiden and a lot of people. I also joined a student association, Itiwana.

7. How did your social life and network change due to the lockdowns and COVID?

Well, the squadron house closed their activities. Also, my friends stayed more isolated. For a long time, I could not do anything.

8. How do you feel the Dutch government has handled the pandemic?

I'm not the one to judge, because I'm a foreigner. But in my view, they handled it very normal. My only comparison is China, but in my opinion they overreacted. They're not a very tolerant government, they take control over everything, and I don't really like it. So, the Dutch policy, I don't think is unnecessary. But a lot of people around me constantly complain. Some people complain that the quarantine here is too long, other people say it's not enough. But in my view, it's just fine. I follow the policies.

9. How do you feel the regulations here differ from those back in China?

Here, everything is more self-orientated. The amount of control is not that strong, from the government. In China, everything is bound to your citizen ID. You also need a QR code for everything in China. You will be checked everywhere, they follow your phone. If one person is confirmed to be infected, they check the exact road that you took and the places you've been, and they lock down everything. They know where you've been, how long you were there, the people you met, and once you are infected they will track down everyone and lock them down. So, in comparison, in the Netherlands it's super chill. Just wear a face mask, okay then. Show a QR code? Fine.

Not everyone here is like that, though. Dutch people can be quite difficult, and they always find a way to complain about everything.

That's true. Even the nice weather. They always have comments on something. I know some people who are very strongly opinionated on face masks, and don't want to wear them. They also feel QR codes are a violation of their personal rights and privacy. I can understand why they don't like it, but I've experienced much worse, so I think it's fine.

10. How do you feel all the regulations were communicated to you, as a foreign exchange student?

In my experience, all of the regulations that were communicated were in Dutch, there was no translated version in English, so at times I was not aware of the current situation. So I was still wearing a face mask while I didn't need to anymore, or the other way around. Or I wanted to show my QR code, while they said "no need". Sometimes, this was of course because that particular place didn't choose to require a QR code, while it was still required. Overall though, I was always a bit behind. I mostly knew the regulations through my friends, because they informed me. I also didn't like to actively try to keep up with the situation, there are better ways to spend my time.

Is there a certain illegal flexibility and bending of the rules in China as well, like some instances in the Netherlands choose not to require a QR code while officially it's still required?

Not really, it's very dangerous. Even if you openly complain about the rules in China, you can get arrested. It's very risky.

11. Did social distancing cause you to grow more attached to Dutch students, Chinese friends here, other international students, or your contacts back home?

I think the lockdown caused me to have more contact with my friends back home. I was locked in my home a lot, and it felt comfortable to just speak in my mother language during that lonely period. I was still in contact with my friends here, though. I don't speak Dutch, unfortunately. I would like to learn, but it's very hard.

12. How do you feel Dutch people overall responded to the lockdown?

Well, my friends and classmates, most of them followed the rules. They even posted on Instagram awareness posts to inspire you to follow the rules. On the other hand, I also see protests, for example organized by a church in Leiden, saying they don't need all those rules. I went there to see how they thought. It was kind of crazy, and it reminded me of Trump.

13. To what extent did you understand and follow the regulations?

I followed them as well as I could and understood them. I got my vaccination on time, showed my QR code everywhere, basically I did all I could do.

Did you agree with all of the regulations?

I would not say I did not agree with them. So I followed all of them.

What about the curfew?

Ah, yeah, that was a bit sad. I stayed inside most of the time then. No options to go outside in the evening, no restaurants to go and eat. It was understandable, but I did not like it. I don't judge this rule or question it, I just accept it. If the government thinks it is effective, then I go along with it.

14. How has the lockdown influenced your study performance?

Well, I actually felt like my grades got better but I studied less. Due to the recorded lectures, I was able to concentrate better. But I did not like that I had no interaction with the professor or fellow students, so you focus more on the lectures and papers. My grades got higher, but I was not happy about it because of the lessened social aspect.

15. How has the lockdown influenced your mental wellbeing?

It was sad, I could not do anything. The only thing I could do was take walks. My sleep cycle got worse. I basically lived like a vampire a couple months ago, sleeping during the day and awake at night. The whole lifestyle made me feel very anxious. At some point, I tried picking up my old hobbies. That helped, and I'm okay now. Life is better, regulations are lifted for the most part and life is getting back to normal.

16. Were there any stigmas or any forms of discrimination towards you as a Chinese exchange student, because of the lockdown?

Not really. Some drunk people told me the virus is China's fault and the government created it. I agreed with them. I don't like the Chinese government or my country either, so yeah.

17. Do you feel Chinese exchange students have a different social position compared to exchange students of other nationalities?

A little bit, yeah. For example, us non-European students pay 11,000 euros per year on tuition, while European students pay 2,000, even half this academic year. Also, a lot of time, us Chinese students

are the only non-white students in the room. Other than that, language is another factor. It's not a big problem for me, but for other Chinese students it can be much more difficult, especially in online classes. Chinese students usually like to stick together, only hang out with each other and speak Chinese, no other friends and no opportunities to learn or speak English or even Dutch. I'm not like that, however. I sometimes hang out with them, but mostly we have our own social circles. I feel like I'm very different from the stereotypical Chinese student.

18. What is your view of the Netherlands at this point, when you compare it to how you looked at it when you first came here and before the lockdown?

I was mostly surprised with how close all the cities are to each other, you can get somewhere in 10 minutes. To make a general definition about a whole country is very difficult. Houses are crazy expensive. People are mainly white. People can complain about that, a city being too "white". But I don't complain about China being too "Asian", that's silly. China is their homeland, what do you want? The rightwing thinking of more diversity and inclusivity, I don't agree with that too much. That's just the way things are, that's just the majority of people who live somewhere, you decide to accept the amount of diversity of outsiders that you want to include in your society and culture. Overall, people in the Netherlands are very nice. You can receive kindness from strangers in a town. I like this place. In comparison, it's better than China. Many laws are better and more easy going here, like the marijuana law. Meanwhile, in China, things are very wild. So many areas are controlled by the government, it's almost like they're the mafia or something. Here things are very grown up, laid back and stable. People have their own culture and way of doing things. But the Dutch food is not good. Dutch people have a very low standard of food. "As long as it's food, it's okay." That's how they think. Most people just get a piece of bread for lunch. That's not a meal. In China, people eat an actual meal for lunch. But that's just the way it has been here for generations, so I accept it.

Third interview: Jackson

1. When did you come here?

I think it was around August 2018, I started my MA back then. So 3.5 years so far. I study computer science, and now I'm a second year PhD student. I mostly study AI and reinforced learning. I don't know what I'm going to do after my PhD, since I still have 2.5 years to go. I'll figure it out later.

Where are you from in China?

I'm from Gansu province. My hometown is pretty close to Xi'an. It's like in between a village and a small city.

2. What were your expectations of the Netherlands and life here, when you first came here?

Good question, I never thought about it. I traveled to the Netherlands before coming, so I kind of knew what the country looked like and what to expect. I thought more about my studies when I came here, not so much about life here. I had no expectations, really.

3. Why did you choose the Netherlands as your country of exchange?

The most important reason was I didn't like North European countries, and I didn't like the universities in South Europe. The second reason is my BA university in China has a cooperation program with Leiden University.

4. What was your overall impression when you first came here, and had lived here for a couple of months?

I thought everyone was very friendly, and even when I was walking in the street people just greeted me. This would never happen back in China. Even the bus driver would greet me. That really impressed me, a lot.

5. How did this view change when the lockdown started, and the pandemic took over? Did it change at all?

I don't think this had any influence on my view on the Netherlands. I was quite open to the COVID situation. Everyone's life changed. As for my impression concerning the Netherlands, my thoughts barely changed. I only felt that sometimes the government would change their mind too fast. That is a negative point. Besides that, I don't feel like anything has changed in my perspective.

6. What's your social network like in the Netherlands?

I have some Chinese friends, as well as Dutch and international friends. I'd say my network is going very well. I'm also a member of the board of the ACSSNL association, so that gives me a lot of opportunities to connect with Chinese students. We are actually collaborating with SVS Leiden, to organize some events, currently. I know some Dutch friends through SVS, and because I did my MA here I also got some international friends.

How did you come to be on the board of ACSSNL?

I became a member two months after my arrival here back in 2018. I stayed on because of the social connections, and when you're on the board you can organize events, see more people more often, which is why I'm staying on. Maybe other people also need this kind of connection, which is why I continue to organize other events.

And would you say ACSSNL is more organized towards Chinese students, or Dutch students?

I would say both, for all of them to get in touch with each other. I'd say Chinese students are more our primary goal, originally, but now it's a bit more of both. In the beginning, all events were organized for Chinese students. Since last year, our events are also open towards Dutch and international students. We want Chinese students to be able to get in touch with students of all nationalities. I do think Chinese students have more difficulties connecting with Dutch students, overall. Some of my friends, even my neighbors, I invited them over for dinner the other week. They're from Indonesia, and they say: "Do you feel it's difficult to connect with Dutch people", and I said "I think so", and some of my other Chinese friends talk about this. So I think so.

7. How do you feel the pandemic has influenced your social network?

I think it changed a lot, also because I'm a PhD student now. I focus on my studies a lot more. But also when I did my MA, I went to the bar once or twice a week. During COVID, I felt like I could not hang out with my friends at all. But nowadays, I feel like the situation has changed a lot, and social life is already coming back.

What do you usually do for fun and social activities?

Mostly go to the bar or restaurant with friends. Otherwise, go to the gym or play basketball.

8. When the lockdown first started, back in 2020, did you panic and want to go back home?

Absolutely. The atmosphere in China was very anxious when the lockdown first started. My parents contacted me a lot. I booked a vacation to Morocco back then, and my parents warned me to absolutely not go traveling because it was too dangerous.

At what point did you start to feel more calm regarding the whole lockdown situation?

I think in the beginning I really panicked. After three months, because I realized I just actually live here, I decided I just needed to live like other people, because otherwise my life and mobility would be too limited.

9. How do you feel the Dutch government has handled the pandemic, overall?

To be honest, overall it's pretty okay. They adjust the policy according to the situation or people's wishes. The only thing I feel uncomfortable about, is that they change their mind too fast. Every other week, it felt like they changed their mind again. This was not good. But overall, I feel it's okay.

Why do you feel overall it's okay?

To be honest, I wasn't really concerned with the pandemic. I know a lot of people watched the news every day and followed it closely, but I decided not to. I feel like my life, personally, was not affected that much. Of course, everyone's life got affected. We had to follow those regulations. But from the perspective of the government's actions, how to say... Okay, put it like this. Covid is coming into our lives. As people, we of course have to do something and change our lives. But I feel the Dutch government didn't ask us to do or change a lot of things. Everything they asked us was kind of fair, because of course when a pandemic comes you have to change and do something. But overall, I feel my life has not changed that much.

10. How are the regulations here different from those back in China?

Well, in China, the government really wanted the infection level to be 0. In the Netherlands, they just wanted to limit the affections a bit and keep it low. 1 and 0 are completely different numbers. But 1 and 100? They are very similar.

11. Were you always aware of the COVID situation back in China?

Yeah, in the beginning my friends and family kept me updated. Because of my busy personal life, I didn't have a lot of time to stay up to date concerning the situation in China.

12. To what extent did you understand and follow the regulations here?

I think, most of the time, I followed the regulations about 90 percent?

So what's the 10 percent you did not follow?

Like, inviting more friends over for dinner than I was officially allowed to. Other than that, I don't think I broke any rules. I also pretty much understood all of the regulations, I think.

13. How do you feel the regulations were communicated to you as a foreign exchange student?

Pretty well. There was a WeChat group, where the regulations were communicated through an official channel. I was at all times aware of the COVID situation and regulations here. There is an official team behind that official channel, a group of people who provide information and translate the regulations, and keep us updated.

Do you feel the government could improve upon the way they communicate to foreign exchange students?

Nothing COVID-related. But some of the government letters are only in Dutch. This could be better.

14. How did social distancing influence your preference in social contacts?

I mostly stayed within my own, small social circle. Like roommate, or girlfriend. My preference in social contacts was not changed though, because everyone stayed in their own circle and nobody from outside could get in.

15. What were the most challenging things that you encountered in your daily life, during the lockdown?

The most annoying thing was that I could not go to the gym. I used to go there 3 or 4 times per week. And then they closed, very annoying.

16. Overall, do you have a strong wish to connect to Dutch people? Do you feel it is an essential part of your stay here?

I really like to connect with Dutch people, but I don't think it is an essential part. I have no strong preference concerning the nationality of my connections. I feel like everyone can be friends with everyone, why ask for a Dutch or international one? Everyone can have the same shared hobbies and interests, regardless of nationality. I don't think that matters.

For making friends I agree, but I feel like connecting with the local population helps with your process of social integration. If I had no contact with the local population during my exchange, I feel like I would miss out a bit.

Ah, yes, I see what you mean and I agree.

17. Do you think Dutch people are easy to connect with?

Yes, during my MA more so than during my PhD because I am so busy currently. But that's just me personally. Overall, I think Dutch people are easy enough to connect with. But that really depends on how deep of a connection you're looking for. You can easily have a nice conversation with Dutch people, but to really have a deep connection is much harder. This is because of the linguistic and cultural barriers. It would be really hard to get a Dutch friend on the same level as a Chinese friend. I think the most important barrier would be personal interests. Because we all grow up with different movies, sports, series, music all across the world. So you could have no idea what the other person is talking about when they talk about their personal interest, and that makes it harder to connect to each other.

What about moral values? Is that a barrier as well? For example, the directness and individualism of Dutch people?

I think this really depends on the specific people. People in China can be direct, too. But overall, yeah, I do think there are value differences between Dutch and Chinese people. But this still mostly depends on the specific person.

What value difference comes to mind?

The first one is that Chinese students generally work harder, and Dutch students spend more time on their social lives. But our goal, as exchange students, is to study here. Also, a lot of people say Dutch people are more direct in their communication, and Chinese people can be more indirect.

Why do you feel you have more focus on your studies? Personal ambition, money, respect for your parents?

Pretty much all of the reasons you mentioned. It's so expensive, and my parents spent so much money, and all of us have certain expectations concerning my study performance. If I were to pay the same amount of tuition as Dutch people do (2000 vs 11000), maybe I would care less as well. Maybe this depends on the study programme as well. Some are more expensive than others.

And was it your ambition to study abroad? Or was this more your parents' wish?

For me personally, I would say fifty/fifty. My parents put a lot of effort in my education, which is what gave me the opportunity to even study abroad.

Would you say this goes for most Chinese students? Or are they outright forced to go abroad?

That kind of situation also happens. But I suppose most of them are not forced by their parents. They mostly also have their own, personal ambition to study abroad.

18. How do you feel Dutch people responded to the lockdown and its regulations?

Overall, people complain a lot. But they mostly follow it. Some people demonstrated, like the commotion in Rotterdam. But most people seem to be okay with it. Not a lot did dangerous things.

And what do you think about Dutch people firing at police cars? Or being very critical about everything, and straight out disobeying their government?

From one perspective, it's not good at all, and shouldn't happen. But from another perspective, it happens everywhere. You can't satisfy everyone. There will always be people who are not happy about the regulations and everything. So I think, yeah, from some perspective, it is happening, and there must be some people who are not happy. But that is a common thing. My opinion is it should not happen, I'm not supporting it. But that's just the way of things.

19. What part of the Dutch response surprised you the most?

The demonstration in Rotterdam and the firing at the police cars. It really shocked me. Also, some people started being racist towards Chinese or Asian people. This also made me feel very shocked.

Did you experience any discrimination?

Yeah, I did. Some of my female friends were bothered by children in the streets, shouting "Chinese virus!" Me, as a strong, young male, some people also shouted at me. It happened several times. I shouted back at them, and the children just ran away. I, as a male, am naturally stronger than my female friends. I was fine, but they immediately started crying. It was tougher for them, I feel.

Do you think this is a very big issue in the Netherlands?

No, it's not everywhere, 99% percent of people are just normal and nice. But like I said, it's a natural thing, and whatever you do, there will always be people who act out like this.

20. Which specific Dutch COVID regulation surprised you the most, or did you think was the most silly or useless?

I think all of them are pretty useful. I can't come up with one that I feel was useless, me personally.

What about the curfew? That's one I personally really disagree with. Because people can still interact or throw parties. Or the supermarket closing at 6 or 8 instead of 10pm.

Ah, yeah, the curfew I agree with. But the supermarket closing earlier doesn't make a difference to me.

21. Did you have COVID yourself, and what was it like?

Yeah, I recovered about three weeks ago. I had a really sore throat, which lasted for 5 days. But nothing else. I had to use an app to order stuff from the supermarket. No other influences on my daily life. Because I study computer science, I mostly just work from home.

22. How have the pandemic and lockdown influenced your study performance?

So yeah, the lockdown really decreased the required amount of publications and research output. My performance definitely decreased. For our PhD, students also have to actively communicate with each other. So my study experience and research output were definitely affected negatively.

23. And what about your mental wellbeing?

Oh, definitely. You cannot hang out with friends. Can only video call with professors or peers. You're living alone. Social connections are so important for human beings, so my mental health was definitely affected more or less, but no serious issues. But some of my Chinese friends did not go outside for one month. Only stayed at home. Their sleep cycle was affected as well.

24. How do you feel your Chinese identity and origin influence your social position in the Netherlands?

From my perspective, I am very proud that I am Chinese. I did not feel any problems while making friends or social connections because I'm Chinese. My identity did not affect my social life at all, I feel.

And what is it that makes you feel proud?

I don't know. I think everyone is, to some extent, proud of their nationality and nation. I feel there is nothing about my country that I am not to be proud of, as well as myself. I am succeeding here, in the Netherlands, as a PhD student. I have a lot of friends, I am friendly and helpful, I give people positive emotions. Those are all good things, and I don't feel ashamed of anything. There is nothing bad about being Chinese.

And does being here make you feel more proud about being Chinese?

Definitely. In China, there is a saying that you feel more proud about your country when you're abroad.

Do you feel a lot of your Chinese friends feel the same way?

I think so, yes.

Do you feel it's fair to even talk about something called "Chinese identity"? Does this exist?

Well, of course, everyone is different. But overall, people have expectations regarding Chinese identity.

And how would you define Chinese identity?

People always say: "modest, hardworking, indirect, relatively shy". Because here, you can just start conversations with strangers in the pub. Not in China.

Can you think of any reasons, origins or influences on these characteristics?

I think it comes mostly from Chinese history, philosophical works and important books. I think those affect Chinese people a lot.

Yeah, I also think this is more important for Chinese culture, the influence of cultural historical works, than in other countries.

I agree.

So, you said you don't feel your social position is influenced by your Chinese identity. But do you feel it's different from the position of other exchange students?

I think so, yes. This is mostly due to more linguistic barriers. If Chinese people could speak perfect English, this difference would be much smaller. Also, most Chinese students don't really like going to the pub. That is a big part of social life here. Most Chinese people here do like to consume alcohol, but there's a cultural difference there. In China, we mostly consume alcohol with our food, like with a social dinner.. In the Netherlands, people just like going to the pub a lot more. They care more about the alcohol itself.

25. Did your stay in the Netherlands influence your view of China?

I think so, yes. In China, we mostly witnessed Chinese media. But here, we only see Western media. Then you get a lot of different information, because those two medias talk about the same thing but from different perspectives. I think my time here not only changed my perspective on China, but also my perspective on Western countries. Because you're exposed to a lot of different media. The biggest

example of this, is in China the media are only talking about China and Chinese people. This makes you feel like China is the center of the world, and you think that everyone speaks Chinese. When you're in Europe, everything is about European countries, and they talk less about China, which makes you realize that China is not the center of the universe.

26. How would you describe the Netherlands, if you had to give a short description?

I think the Netherlands is very good. Most people are very friendly and respect each other, so I think it's good to live here, study here, and do my research here.

27. What is the most important or most stereotypical aspect of Dutch people?

Since I haven't stayed in other countries for this long, I think Dutch people always split their bill. Also for very small amounts of money. I really feel that's a Dutch thing. I'm definitely okay with it, because people earn their own money, and they have the right to ask for it back if they pay for you. They work hard for that, so it's fair.

28. What is the most important difference between the Netherlands and China, do you think?

People always say that Dutch people are business people, so you don't involve a lot of other things when you're doing business. But in China, business is a lot more complex, not as straightforward. You need to consider a lot more things when doing business, it's not just about business. In the Netherlands, it's just about business. If there's a benefit to be had, you do business. If not, then you don't.

29. What is the most interesting conversation you've had with a Dutch person?

I talked to a Dutch classmate while doing my MA. When he heard I was from China, he said "Oh wow, that must be so hard for you! You must be so glad to be here." I did not understand that. He felt that I was struggling with life in China, and now I could finally have a good time because of coming here. That was interesting to me, and really shocked me a bit. This did not happen a lot, but definitely more than once.

Did you correct the misconceptions people had about China, or did you just leave it as-is?

I just described to them my personal experience, but did not try to actively change their mind.

30. Would you recommend the Netherlands as a good place for studying to friends back home?

Definitely. I feel like people are friendly here, almost everyone speaks English, you can travel anywhere you want so fast because the country is so small. The education here is very nice, compared to other European countries.

Fourth-sixth interview: Xandra, Boris & Zena

1. How long have you lived in the Netherlands?

X September 2019, but I went back to China in the first year, and after the lockdown I went back to the Netherlands. It was quite hard, because my flight got canceled, but then I got the last ticket for the last available flight.

Z It was not that expensive, like 400 euros. Now it's super expensive, like 4000 euros.

B It's even getting more expensive right now.

Z We also have to pay for the quarantine ourselves.

B I came here in August of 2020, so in the middle of COVID. It was pretty okay, everything was normal in China. Flights were more expensive than usual, but not crazy. 1000 euros. At first, I was thinking "I'm going to a place where there is COVID, wow". But then I came here, and it was like there was no COVID at all. Back in China, there was no lockdown anymore as well. So it felt the same when I first came here. At first, I worried about getting COVID. But after being here for a couple days, it seemed like COVID was not dangerous at all over here.

Z My mom was actually more worried than me. Actually, during the first lockdown, I was pretty scared, because nobody really seemed to care about it. But now, I'm perfectly fine. Also because of Omikron. Especially during the first wave, nobody seemed to care about COVID. Nobody wore their face masks. I mean, come on, people! You have to wear your face masks, it travels through the air! And in China, everyone really treated it very seriously.

Well, back in March, people were very scared here, in my opinion.

Z The summer of 2020 was pretty nice and okay, infection wise.

X I was actually never really scared about it or worried. I knew that I could recover from the virus, so I did not worry.

B Really? I know people can recover from it or die, but when I came here I was pretty shocked.

X But I heard that the amount of people who died from it was not that big.

Z I was mostly worried about the long term effects. Like your sense of taste and smell, and feeling very tired for a long time. Because you cannot tell if you have it at first.

X I was more concerned about infecting other people than myself.

B Me too.

Z You can also infect other people a couple days before you get symptoms.

X The symptoms are not the most important thing to me. People will treat you differently if you have COVID, especially back in China.

B Yeah! Like, if you got back to China from another country, and you got infected, the government knows everything about it, and it is communicated to other people.

Do you feel people in the Netherlands would treat you differently?

B No, not really. Everyone around me already got COVID.

Z Two of my housemates as well.

And when did you come here, Z?

Z September 2019, and I went back to China for a bit in January 2020.

2. What expectations did you have when you first came to the Netherlands?

X I thought life here would be very peaceful and calm, and maybe covid would not be here. China is very strict, and I thought they would take care of the situation.

Why did you choose the Netherlands for your studies?

X Because it's very cheap. And I don't need to learn another language, because I already speak a little bit of English.

What else did you know about the Netherlands?

X I had heard of it before, knew it was a country that was quite tolerant. I also heard the quality of education was quite good, so I thought it was a nice place to come.

And what vision did you have of your life here, besides your studies?

X I had no expectations, because I thought I would only get disappointed. This is my first experience studying abroad.

B I also came here because it's pretty cheap. I also applied to some universities in the UK and Australia, which were much more expensive. Only tuition fees were cheap here. But living fees, like groceries, are super expensive here, I think. Compared to Germany, Spain, Italy.

X Maybe that's because the average income here is higher than in other countries.

B I also went to Amsterdam for 2 weeks before coming here, and I thought that was a very good experience. Like X said, it was very tolerant. I thought, at first. But Leiden is super conservative, not that tolerant. Especially professors. Or Minerva. Really new for me. I also chose the most eurocentric study, ever, and I did not expect that.

What about your expectations concerning your social life?

B The thing is I don't drink alcohol, I don't drink beer. So I expected that I wouldn't go to parties that much. And now I find I don't need a lot of social activities, because I have a lot of energy myself.

X Me too.

Z I only looked at the universities I could afford when choosing, so that is the reason I picked the Netherlands.

3. Did you want to go back home when the lockdown first started here?

X no, because China was quite strict concerning COVID. I knew that I could not go outside during the lockdown in China, and I knew I could not handle staying inside for that long. Here, in the Netherlands, the COVID situation seemed more dangerous, but I don't think so personally, and at least I can go outside here and the weather is so nice here.

So they track you in China?

X If you enter the country from outside, yeah. Someone from the government or police even called my dad to ask if I had plans to go back to China.

Z yeah, I even got called here with the same question. I was shocked they had my phone number.

X yeah, they would definitely track me if I went back. I didn't want that, so I did not go back. I'm also not sure when I want to go back to China. I don't feel scared about the situation here.

B For me it's different, because I only came here in Summer 2020. So I experienced the entire covid situation in China. It was insane. They give you a card that allows you to go out, and only one person per household is allowed to go outside once per day. This was around March 2020. The joy of my life is going to the supermarket, and I could not even do that. My dad is an office worker for the government, and he was in charge of checking the COVID stuff. My mom also got a special card for being able to go to work. I think this lasted for only one month, and then it was over. During that month, it was very strict. We even had to wear masks when walking outside.

So, my view of the situation in China is that they locked down a big part of Wuhan back in March 2020, locked down everything, and then after 1.5 months it opened up again, and COVID was basically over.

B yeah, basically. There are still a couple of cases sometimes, but not more.

Z yeah. Even if there are a couple of cases, they lock down a whole part of the city and test like two million people in two days. It costs a lot of money.

B they also categorize local cases and foreign cases.

Z, did you feel anxiety when the lockdown started, and you felt you had to go back to China?

Z Not really, because I knew how hard it was to catch a flight during the lockdown. I live in Oegstgeest, it's very quiet there and very nice. I thought it was okay, and did not really worry about it. Thought the pandemic would be over in a couple of months,

B And now, with all the dropped regulations, it feels like there's no more COVID. Everything's open.

Yeah, do you think that's a smart idea?

Z I think so many people are just done with it, and now that everyone can go outside there's no more reason to have all those lockdown regulations.

B Yeah, I think it's partly smart, also because of Omikron, which is not that serious.

Z yeah, I also feel the lockdown is not very good for my mental health, like during the curfew time, I was drinking every single night.

4. What is your social network like in the Netherlands?

X very weak, I only know a small amount of people. For me, social contact costs a lot of energy, so I don't care a lot about social life. I will be happy if I know some people, but I don't try to get to know a lot of people.

Are most of your friends here Chinese, or Dutch, or...?

X I have some Taiwanese friends

B I am similar to her, but I do know some people from my studies who are Dutch or internationals. Most of the people I hang out with are Chinese, because we share the same values on money, but I have different values with Dutch or international people on money. They don't like to spend a lot of money, less than Chinese people. They are more focused on saving money.

Do you feel Dutch people are cheap?

B I wouldn't say cheap, just that they're very good at saving money. Managing their capital, so to say. I also met some people who are very different from the stereotypical Dutch, like they wanted to pay for my meal. But I guess it also depends on the person.

So what is the stereotypical Dutch person, to you?

B Someone who sends a Tikkie for 0.50 cents. Besides money, I would say another stereotypical thing is that Dutch people are pretty straightforward. But us three, as Chinese people, are also pretty straightforward. So it's also really a personal thing. Maybe a regional thing. I am from Shandong, where Kongzi comes from, and we are all taught to be polite. But me personally, I am more straight forward.

And what is your social network like, Z?

Z I live with two Dutch housemates, but I don't know them personally. We were all put there through a housing agency. Most of my social contacts are from my studies, either Chinese, Dutch or international. I also have some friends left from my previous house, where 25 people lived.

B I live in a studio, so I don't have any form of contact with neighbors.

And did your social network change a lot because of the lockdown?

Z Yeah, because I met up less with everyone, since everyone went back to their own homes.

B At the start, I did not meet a lot of people because of online classes. But now there are offline classes again, and I meet a lot more people. People also recognized me from Instagram.

X My social life mostly changed when there was a change in my roommate situation.

5. How do you feel the Dutch government has handled the pandemic?

X I feel I can't really say. Their values are different. I think they made the regulations that they made because they think liberty and listening to people's opinions is important, and also there are so many politicians arguing with each other, all who have different opinions on the policy. So this is why I understand the regulations that they made. If they ask people to do more than they already are, maybe too many people will disagree and start protesting.

But what about your personal opinion?

X I accept it. I don't really judge it. But, I thought in the UK, they had the wish to let all people get COVID to build up resistance. I disagree with that, and I think the Dutch policy is much better.

B I personally think, at first, they were not doing anything about it. Or at least not enough. Later, I thought maybe it's not as bad as I first thought. Then around Christmas 2021, they had another lockdown.

Z Yeah, the strictest lockdown in Europe, I heard.

B Yeah, and I was thinking "why still have all those regulations when the statistics are so bad over here?" I just didn't see the point.

Z For me, at the beginning in March 2020, I thought the Dutch government hardly cared about the pandemic. As for group immunity, in the UK, I don't think it's a good thing, because you willingly sacrifice one group of people, namely old people. Of course I understand it takes a long time to come to a decision, policy-wise, because of democratic decision making. But at the point they came to a decision, the COVID situation was already much worse. The face masks, for example. There was a law in the Netherlands that forbade people from covering their faces. So before the government could enforce the wearing of face masks, first they had to change that law. I can understand the democratic nature of this, but I don't think it's a good thing in this situation. I also did not understand the earlier closing of the shops, because then you have more people going to the store in a smaller amount of time. As for the curfew, yeah, people will probably have less parties.

X I didn't really follow the curfew or people limit regulations. I invited over a lot of people.

Z The last time they had curfew was in WW2. So we're reliving that now.

6. How do the regulations here differ from those back in China?

X A lot. In China, if you get tested positive, you are sent to the hospital for quarantine with other people. But here, you just have to stay home, get sleep, and drink water.

Z Yeah, but at the start in China, people also did not know what was going to happen. The situation was reminiscent of SARS. Also the QR code is different here, in China you have to show it when you go outside or take the bus. Here, it's only for specific places like restaurants or events.

X In China, there was no compulsory vaccine. But there will be social pressure, and people will think you are not supporting your community.

B Also, in China, when you get vaccinated, you get a ton of free food. Here, you just get a popsicle.

Z I also don't understand the point of the vaccine, if you still have to stay inside and live a limited life. There are also side effects and risks for other diseases if you get a vaccine. Here, I understand why they force old people to do it, because they're more vulnerable to COVID.

X I also think the PCR tests here are so expensive, they're 40 or 50 euros and then you get a travel certificate. But in Germany, these tests are free. In France as well, used to anyway.

B Yeah, I think the Netherlands is the most expensive country except for the Northern European countries.

Z Quarantine regulations are different here as well. It also depends on the province in China, what quarantine rules you have to follow.

B Also, after quarantine in China you have to do a PCR test.

Z Also, in China, if you want to travel, you have to take multiple tests. Here, you can just go back to the Netherlands. Also, in China, if a previous flight that day had a positive test, they close down all the other flights for that day. So you never know if you can actually catch your flight.

7. And how do you feel the regulations here were communicated to you as a foreign exchange student?

X We have a whatsapp group that communicates all the regulations to us, in English.

Z Yeah. We got added through our social network.

B Yeah, someone from my study group sent me the link.

Z There is also a WeChat group that translates and communicates all the regulations. Also, my roommates sometimes keep me updated.

X I learnt most of my information through Z. Like the curfew, I did not know about that before Z told me.

8. Do you feel very foreign or Chinese when you're here? Like you're aware that you're an outsider here?

B a little bit.

Z I mostly feel like an outsider because I'm an international, not because I'm Chinese. This is because a lot of the Dutch students specifically state "no Internationals, Dutch only".

B We also pay a different tuition fee.

Z Also the student discounts are not for international students. I get that we pay a higher tuition fee, because my parents don't live here and pay taxes. But I live here, I spend money, so of course I pay taxes. I think that should at least give me the right to the same student discount and free travel with OV.

B But I think you get this when you work here.

9. How did social distancing affect your preference in social contacts? Or was there no influence?

X for me, not so much. I stayed inside a lot anyway, and I don't contact my family quite often.

B I don't feel there is any social distancing, actually, right now anyway, since there are hardly any regulations anymore. I also did not feel like contacting my family a lot more.

Z My family actually contacts me a lot more because of the lockdown, to see how I'm doing.

10. What were the challenges you encountered in your daily life?

X Finding a job to cover my living expenses. I mostly applied in restaurants. Most of them required me to speak Dutch, and they didn't want to take care of the working permit for me, because the process is very long and complicated.

B Yeah, all non-EU students need a working permit. For me studying was the most difficult, because when I first came here all classes were online. Also, I'm not very familiar with the Dutch education system. I also encountered challenges in finding jobs. I ran a trial run in a restaurant, but did not get a contract. I don't think I'm facing any other challenges right now, life is going all right. I don't think Dutch language is an important factor in daily life, because English is okay everywhere. Maybe there are some occasions where you get treated differently if you don't speak Dutch, but not in general.

X That's not my experience. Every restaurant I applied to required me to speak Dutch. I worked in an acupuncture center before, and some guests did not speak English. This was a definite language barrier. Maybe if I spoke some Dutch, they would feel more comfortable.

B It probably also depends on the city. Amsterdam is going to be totally different, because more people speak English there.

Z It also depends on the situation. For going to the supermarket, English is fine. But for finding a job or place to live, you really have a disadvantage if you don't speak Dutch.

B Another challenge is that we pay a lot more tuition fees. This puts more pressure on finishing your study programme as soon as possible.

Z Also, if I want to get an internship, I have to still be a student. Another challenge is the online classes, which did not help in my study performance.

Do you consider your studies to be more important than your social life?

Z Definitely.

B During my first year, I didn't prioritize my studies. I was more focused on getting used to life here and relaxing. Now, I am more focused on my studies because I have gotten used to life here and my courses are getting more intense.

Does the Netherlands still feel very foreign to you?

X I think fifty fifty. There are many different communities in the Netherlands. Both local Dutch people and local Chinese people. I don't feel I belong to either of those. But I do think, in the long run, I think the Netherlands could feel like home. I consider it to be my home, to some extent, right now. Like, when I travel to another European country, it feels different and less comfortable, and I know I will return to the Netherlands at some point, because I am just traveling there. That's probably just because I have gotten accustomed to how things are here. Also, I like the Netherlands because it's clean, safe, organized and cozy. Other European countries are less clean and safe. I traveled to several countries.

B Last summer, I traveled to Greece and Spain. I also went to Poland, Cyprus, Switzerland and Germany. One of the biggest differences was the weather, in Cyprus at least. It was so hot. Switzerland was way more expensive. Poland was more conservative, the Netherlands is much more open minded. Life here is good. Prices are good. People are good. There is nightlife. I could not consider it my home, however. Also, there was no transition period for me. I also did not look at this as 'living in another country', but 'living in another city'. The Netherlands doesn't really feel that foreign to me.

Z For me, it really depends. I didn't have a culture shock when I first came here. I did have trouble making good friends, because even after talking English for a while, they would always switch back to Dutch, and that did make me feel very foreign. But I have my room here, and have gotten used to the environment, so in that sense it does feel like home, a bit. It's complicated. I didn't travel a lot. Last summer, I went to Italy and Germany. To me, there was not a big difference with the Netherlands. But when I came back, and got on the Dutch public transport and everything I immediately thought "ah, feels like home". It's so much cleaner and organized here than in, for instance, Belgium. So for now, I could definitely call the Netherlands my home. I'm not sure when I will go back to China. It feels like I have two homes, which is really nice.

11. Do you feel Dutch people are open minded and easy to connect to?

X For the most part, yeah. But I don't fully understand their social mode and code. They're very outgoing and talkative. It feels difficult for me to really uphold a deep, long standing connection and friendship with Dutch people. It's easier to just have superficial contact and small chats. But that's perhaps more my problem, because I'm not that socially active. I also don't feel a strong urge to work on this actively. I think my social network is fine. I haven't met anyone yet that I want to put that much effort into.

B I think I have a similar experience. Most Dutch people I encountered were in class, and our interactions were mostly small talk. I did hang out with some of them after class a bit, but I really don't know how I need to communicate with them through text messages. Do I message them or not? I don't know what the social code is here. I also don't really go to parties, and this is where most Dutch people like to socialize. Maybe that's just a cultural difference. When I hang out with Chinese people, we mostly just go to restaurants. Dutch people prefer to hang out at home. But I get sleepy very easily in that situation. I prefer to go out.

Z I think Dutch people are very nice, but I thought it was very hard to get really close to them. I only have one Dutch friend, and she is really not like other Dutch people. I also didn't really try very hard to become friends with anyone, I just socialized organically with the people I liked.

B Also, I really expected Dutch people to be very open minded before coming here. But things are very different here in small villages. There were some cases where people asked me if I eat dogs, because I'm from China.

Z Yeah, I think their intention is nice, they're just curious. They just don't know a lot of things about China.

B Yeah, this was different from the image I had before.

12. How do you feel Dutch people responded to the lockdown and its regulations?

X I think a lot of Dutch people are not really used to the lockdown lifestyle, because I know a lot of Dutch people like to go to the bar or club at night. They were all closed during the lockdown, so I imagine a lot of Dutch people were not very happy with the lockdown. Also the facemasks, many Dutch people are not used to wearing those.

Z You can really tell if they want to wear it or not, based on how they wear it. Some people don't cover their nose.

X Maybe some people think it's not useful, but they are forced to wear them by the government. So maybe some of them are not very happy about that.

B Definitely, in general, Dutch people are not really following the rules. Or at least not happy with it.

Z Yeah, and even if they follow them, it's hard to tell if they actually believe in those rules.

B You can really tell Dutch people are not used to wearing face masks, while in Asia it's so normal.

Z Even if Dutch people follow the rules, especially young people, they still don't care about getting COVID, because they think they will recover just fine.

Why do you think Asian people are more used to wearing facemasks?

Z In Japan, if your makeup is really bad, you just wear a facemask. And a couple years ago in China, the air conditioning was really bad, so everybody wore a face mask. Also, in China, people are just really used to following the rules.

B Also, in China, if you think the lower half of your face does not look as good, you cover it with a face mask.

X I heard, in the Netherlands, there is a law that forbids you from covering your face, because of religion. Also, one of my Dutch classmates told me that she thinks people wear facemasks to become more anonymous, but Dutch people don't like to be that anonymous.

And were you very surprised about any Dutch response to the regulations?

Z I thought it was very weird that, at the beginning when the Dutch government told people not to visit their grandparents, because they might die, Dutch people still did it. I think this reflects something concerning Dutch values.

B One of my classmates was at a party with 20 or 30 people, when the COVID situation was quite serious.

Z Yeah, and one of my friends, in that situation said: "Oh, what are the police going to do to me?" And this was in December 2020.

13. Which specific COVID-regulation surprised you the most, and why?

X I think the 1.5m rule. We don't have that in China, and it's difficult to measure exactly what 1.5m is, and people will still get too close sometimes. It's hard to enforce.

B I agree. Also the curfew, definitely.

Z I think that was to prevent people from having parties. But people can still party in the afternoon.

B And the limited number of people? What was that about? Or shops closing earlier? That was so illogical, because then you have more people at the same time. Or no alcohol purchases after 8? People can still buy alcohol in the afternoon.

Z It would also be super crowded from 6 to 8. Another thing is wearing face masks when you are walking in class or a restaurant, but not when you are sitting down. You can still transmit the virus. I just don't get why they lifted some of the regulations, but not all of them. It doesn't make sense.

B I agree.

14. Did social distancing have a negative impact on your study performance?

X Positive impact for some courses, actually, because I was allowed to keep an open book during the exam. I also like not having to go to lectures. I can just sleep in, and listen to the lecture on my own time. Also, if you are interested in another course, it costs time to travel to that course. But if you only need to follow the class online, it saves time and you can attend more courses. I also feel some people were more willing to answer questions during online classes, because they were too shy to answer questions during physical classes.

Z But I feel it's easier to have direct interaction with your peers or professor, and it's harder in online classes to ask questions.

B For me, it's a funny story. There are a lot of courses which I never attended. During the online classes, I was just sleeping. I did not watch the recorded lectures, even though I had to. I somehow managed to get through the first year, but I did get lower grades.

Z For me too.

B Also, not doing anything is also exhausting, because you are just killing time and don't do anything all day long. You are still anxious and doing something, which is procrastinating.

Z Also, in class, if I did not do the homework and my classmates told me they didn't either, I would feel less anxious. But during online class, I felt I was the only one who didn't prepare well.

15. How has the lockdown influenced your overall mental wellbeing?

Z In the beginning, winter 2020, I was not doing well, because of the curfew, online classes, and all my housemates all moved out. But after the regulations lifted a bit, it was a lot better, because at least I could make friends.

X I think my mental situation is quite good, until winter last year. At the beginning of the lockdown, I didn't really have many opportunities to meet people or socialize, but I had friends who lived in the same building. We saw each other almost everyday, so at that time I at least had someone to talk to, so I didn't really feel lonely at that time. After that, I moved to another apartment, where I got another roommate with whom I got along quite well, which made me very happy. I also started to play some mobile phone games at that time with other people, which was quite fun. But last winter there was no one in the house at all, so I got quite sad and just focused all my time on my studies. So that was not a very good time. Doing better now, thankfully.

B I was also doing a lot of nothing during the start of the lockdown. Just stayed at home a lot, but I felt fine with that. My only anxiety came from study stress, because I didn't do anything or had the motivation to change that. But this anxiety only lasted for 5 minutes a week, after which I would calm down again. I also played a lot of games during that time, which I don't do normally. I also watched a lot of TV series during the lockdown. Sometimes, I hung out with some friends, which helped with my mental health. Going outside for a walk also helped. I would say my mental health was okay, in general. Like I said before, I have a lot of energy just by myself, I don't need other people.

16. Were there any stigmas or forms of discrimination towards you as a Chinese exchange student?

X I didn't feel any discrimination, actually. I'm easily ignored because I am quite small, so maybe people didn't notice me. Nothing uncomfortable or rude.

B Personally, I haven't encountered anything. I did hear some stories. Not about racism, but cultural insensitivity. Like, during group projects, when my friend speaks, the other people would just ignore whatever she said. They had to do a survey, and in China the survey can't be open, so they have to use a VPN. And in the comments, the teammates wrote something about an "asian VPN", which I thought was very insensitive.

There are of course a lot of misconceptions regarding China, among Dutch people.

B I also heard that Dutch children learn a very insensitive song in elementary school, a birthday song where they make a silly face.

Z Yeah, but kids don't understand the discriminative nature of this song. They just sing it. But the teachers should know better. Maybe they don't really care.

B Also, in Hilversum, I saw some posters that said "Geen Chinese samenleving", but maybe it's just about the QR codes, or the Chinese social credit system.

Z You know, it's funny, the first time I heard about this system was in the Netherlands, I never heard about it in China. How can all the Dutch people know about something that we don't know? Or the AliPay system, where if you pay your bills on time, you get more social credit?

B Yeah, it feels like they really exaggerate it.

Z Yeah, like they are really trying to scare people. Me, personally, have not encountered any obvious discrimination, like people shouting "Go back to your country". But, a couple of weeks ago, I handed in my interview report, and the supervisor gave the feedback that "he thought the phrasing was too formal, so he assumed that I used a translate app". But he would not have assumed this if I were European. Also, I heard from my friend at the start of COVID, when there was no corona in the Netherlands yet, she is from Hong Kong, and when she walked on the street, someone asked her "If I shake your hand, will I get corona?" She answered "No, but you will get HIV."

B Also, I'm not sure, but one day I was walking with some friends, and we crossed a really chaotic street in Den Haag, and one guy almost hit us while he was circling, and he said something. I didn't hear him clearly, but my friend said he shouted something like "kanker Chinees".

Z Also, some people in the street who you don't even know, they just say NiHao to you. Do they say that to all Asian people? It's really weird. Not necessarily offensive. Most of them are teenagers.

17. How do you feel your Chinese identity influences your social position here?

X I think, for me, I would divide social position into two kinds. One is if I'm in a Chinese group, with people who share a similar background. I would feel more at ease there. The other is if I'm in a group with non-Chinese, in which case I would feel like... Hmm.. I don't know. I don't think it really depends on the situation, it depends more on the people themselves. There was one situation, where I worked in a group full of team members who were Dutch, and they were all talking Dutch, which made me feel quite excluded. I felt more comfortable during another situation where there were only international students, and we were all talking English.

Do you feel there is a difference in social position between students from other nationalities and you?

X No, not really. But I do feel a difference between me and Taiwanese people. They don't really like people from mainland China, and they don't like talking to us. There are not a lot of Taiwanese people in Leiden. But I do have some Taiwanese friends here. But I can always tell the political opinion of Taiwanese people by the way they talk about China. Some Taiwanese people in the Netherlands can be quite aggressive in their opinions, though. So I'm also careful with what I do and don't say.

Z Yeah, so one Taiwanese person at a dinner party disliked getting the "China" label attached to them. "I'm not Chinese!" she said very angrily.

B I also know some Taiwanese people, and also some Malaysian Chinese people. They label themselves as Overseas Chinese. But they don't really like the Chinese label. Like, radically against it.

Do you feel the social position of Taiwanese students is different than that of Chinese students, here in the Netherlands?

B Similar, but not the same. The main difference is that Chinese students are more attached to other Chinese students. The community is not that big, so we tend to stick together. Taiwanese, not so much. As for the influence of my Chinese identity on my social position here, when I was in China, I was very aware of the fact that I am Chinese. But when I came here, I realized I have the bigger label "Asian" attached to me. So first I am an Asian, and then I am Chinese. Chinese is a sub label of Asian. Other than that, I feel the influence on my social life is not that big. But sometimes, when people talk about how things are in certain countries, they always eventually wonder how that thing is like in China. They always ask me about it, and this reinforces the fact that I am Chinese.

Z I also feel like that. Especially after COVID, with the protests, people are protesting against China and Asia, really makes me aware of my identity. Also, when people ask you questions about China, it shows that they don't know all of those things, which increases the distance you feel between each other. They are so curious about my background, and don't know anything about it, which makes you realize you are two totally different people from totally different parts of the world.

B Yeah, and also, when people hear I am from China, they say I'm so brave.

Z Me too! Like, you must miss your parents so far away from home.

B People also tell me how cool I look, and assume I'm from Japan or Korea.

Z Also people really assume China is so super different from Dutch culture, while at the same time it is not all that different. Everything they hear is from the media, so I understand why they think that way. In terms of the social position, we as Chinese are put in an "exotic" position, because we are so "different".

B Also, we haven't talked about Yellow Fever yet. It's also a big thing. When you go on a dating app, so many people have an Asian fetish. People have so many sexual assumptions regarding Asian people. You will also encounter people who only date Asian people, it's weird. I do feel that for heterosexual Asian men, the situation is better. But for women and gays, the situation is not as good. I also heard stories about western men going to Bangkok for homosexual and heterosexual sex tourism.

Do you feel there is also White Fever among Asian people?

Z Definitely! But the hierarchy is totally different. White people are always dominant. They are even worshiped by Asian people. We have an expression for it in Chinese, that translates to "the girl only eats Western food".

X I know someone who dates a white a guy, but does so only because she appreciates their appearance.

Z I also think the beauty standard is colonized by western culture. Even in China, you are more beautiful when you have pale skin and look more Western.

18. Do you think there even exists something called "Chinese identity"?

X I think oftentimes this is more a cultural identity than a national identity. For example, I know some middle-aged Chinese-Dutch immigrants who still call Dutch people a certain name, and see them as a different group of people. She herself actually speaks Dutch quite well, and is well integrated into the Dutch community. But she still has very clear ideas that distinguish herself from Dutch people, culturally. So I think it is more of a cultural identity. But still, it's very complex. Like, Taiwanese people share a similar culture, and share a similar background, but at the same time are totally different. The concept of Chinese identity depends on how you use it, and on who. I guess a general definition of Chinese identity, to me, would be that the people share a similar nationality. Otherwise,

it would be people whose mother tongue is Chinese. It's still very difficult. I think, as long as those people identify as Chinese, they are Chinese.

B For me, I feel like Chinese identity is not the right word here. Maybe we should speak of Chinese cultural heritage. It's more attached to language, values, cultural practices, the way you interact with the outside world. Chinese cultural heritage is an umbrella term for people who share all of these things, and are willing to fall under this term. Agency is also an important part of this question. An example of shared practices is the celebration of holidays and festivals, or simple things like Chinese food, coming together and making jiaozi. I think we have a very different concept of family here in China, as well. In Europe, when you turn 18, you are an adult and free to go. But in China, you are still treated like a child, and family is still very important. Also, the way in which you socialize with people is different in China. Hierarchy is an important factor.

Z I feel the identity of Chinese students here is very... Chinese. When they come here, to a foreign country, they separate themselves from non-Chinese very strongly. They refer to all people who are not Chinese as "waiguoren", even though they themselves are the foreigners in that country. They still keep centralizing themselves.

B I also feel like, besides cultural heritage, gender and class are important as well. For example, if I am a middle class student, my experience would be totally different from the upper class. The experience of a gay male would also be completely different from that of a heterosexual female.

Z It's also very much a political thing. You are somewhat representative of what your government is doing.

B Exactly. I am Chinese, but I am kind of ashamed of what my country is doing. So we are in the middle of this struggle, between myself and my government. On the one hand, I have all of my cultural values and practices from back home, but I don't agree with what my government is doing.

Z Yeah! In China, people also think you are not really Chinese if you don't agree with what the government is doing. So we are kind of stuck in between.

Do you identify with your country, X?

X When we're talking about politics, maybe not so much. But culturally, definitely. There are still some cultural and social behavioral differences between me and Dutch people. I don't necessarily feel like a Chinese person in those situations, but more like a non-Dutch.

Z But your nationality doesn't have to be a part of your identity.

B But China is so nationalist, if you're Chinese you have to be nationalist.

Z You can't really distinguish the country, government and culture. They're all the same thing.

B Yeah, so if you say you don't identify or agree with any parts, you are shamed. It has something to do with the nationalist atmosphere.

19. Did your stay here in any way influence the way you view China?

Z I think the way we view China is the reason we came here. Also because our parents wanted us to. But we all came here because we ourselves wanted to. But some parents also really don't want their children to study abroad, because everything in China is already so nice. It's really different from 20 years ago, when everyone was going abroad. But now, the education in China is so much better. People would sooner be skeptical that you feel like you want to leave China.

X My situation is a bit different. My dad thinks China is the best, but he wanted me to study abroad and then go back, so I can contribute to my country.

B I think most Chinese parents think this way.

Z Yeah! So your dad doesn't want you to study abroad for your sake, but for your country. But to answer your question, no, my stay here did not influence the way I view China.

X I actually think I have become more radical, because of you, Z. We talk about politics quite often, which makes me realize a lot of things I did not know before.

Z Yeah, in China, you can't talk about anything. It's really hard to have very different opinions, because the government will influence your opinion. So maybe, yeah, because that influence is gone here, maybe the Netherlands has changed my opinion a bit. Like some things about Chinese history I did not know about, like the Tiananmen Square incident. I only heard about it after coming here.

B I had a pretty bad image of China before coming here. Now, I feel it is becoming worse.

Z Yeah, especially after COVID!

B I feel the image people have of China in the Netherlands is pretty exaggerated. So sometimes, I try to correct them and defend China, but then Dutch people tell me I'm brainwashed.

Z Yeah. If you disagree with what people say about China here, they all think you're brainwashed.

B Yeah. But if something is said that simply isn't true, I will correct them. But I also know some Chinese people who are pretty radical, and they think all that misinformation is actually true.

Z, why did the COVID situation make your view of China worse?

Z Because of the QR code thing. You need to scan the code everywhere, even in the supermarket. They even record where you've been. They know everything about you.

20. How did the pandemic influence your view of the Netherlands?

X It's difficult to say, as I don't have much knowledge about the Netherlands. So I think the COVID measures of the Dutch government are a way for me to learn more about the Netherlands. What I learnt is that Dutch people seem to not be so afraid of dying. They seem quite relaxed about it. Also people here are quite strong and healthy, because most of them recovered from COVID very easily just by drinking water. I also feel like people here highly value their liberty, and they are afraid of the expansion of government power. They have many diverse views towards COVID measures. Like, there is a group of people scared of vaccines because of religion. And this is okay in the Netherlands, you won't be blamed for your opinion. But in China, those people will be put in jail, or at least people will really judge them. People in the Netherlands can have more diverse opinions.

Z Or people just don't really care. And at least the Dutch government and society allow for different opinions.

X Also, they are not very strict about quarantine. You can have quarantine at home, and nobody will check it.

B As for me, I mentioned I went here before, for summer school. I came back in the middle of COVID. I really feel how big of a difference there is between individualism and collectivism. Here, it seems like people sometimes don't really care. At first, it seemed very irresponsible. But after that, because the virus isn't as strong as it was before, maybe it's fine to not care so much, because people are not really dying of it. In my opinion, China and the Netherlands are two perfect examples of complete opposites. One is very individualist and democratic, and the other is collective and centralized.

X Also I realized in China, people don't really care much about their privacy. They just let the government collect their information. But in the Netherlands, this is totally not okay.

B Yeah, we're so used to all the cameras everywhere. Or the facemasks. But here, it's a different thing. Everything is so new for people here. I also feel people in China are losing their agency in some way, because they were simply forced to quarantine. So in the Netherlands, people have relatively more agency.

X I also realized that in China, people connect the virus to the person, he or she is not a person anymore, but a danger, the source that can spread the virus. It's very dehumanizing. But in the Netherlands, the situation is much better. You are still a person here, even if you get the virus.

Z I also think the influence of the pandemic on my view of the Netherlands is not that big, since I didn't stay here for very long. I think Dutch people really follow all the legal processes, even if cases are very high.

21. What are other important differences between the Netherlands and China?

B There's so much to talk about. One example is the frequency of medical examinations. They don't do full medical examinations here, because the government would have to cover everything. And that's too expensive. At least in China, you can get it and just pay for it yourself.

X Another one is when I had a stomach ache. My GP (huisarts) diagnosed me as having an infection. But actually, it was a wrong diagnosis. So I went there in person, and was diagnosed with constipation. I got medicine for that, and it still didn't work. Afterwards, I went to a Chinese medical center, and the acupuncture eventually did work.

Z Yeah, here, if your problems don't seem serious enough, you will not be helped. Only if your symptoms are very serious, only then will you be checked. It's like they don't take your health seriously enough, because they assume Dutch people are strong enough.

B Another one is the psychologists. I feel like, if Chinese people go to therapy here, Dutch psychologists don't really know about Chinese culture, so they don't know how to help our problems.

Z Yeah, I think therapists should learn some anthropology.

B But there are cross cultural psychologists. But they should include more backgrounds.

Z But honestly, in China psychologists are pretty shitty. It's not normal to go to therapy in China. People will think you're a psycho.

X My experience is that I emailed a psychologist, and when I wanted to make an appointment she first asked about my insurance. I didn't wanna go, because it seemed like these people cared more about money than about me.

Z Dutch people are also more used to splitting the bill. In China, it's not really normal to split the bill.

B Yeah, in China people fight more to pay the bill. In China, you also have the concept of *renqing*. It's like a favor, an owed favor that you have to pay back. If I pay the bill, you owe me a *renqing*. You can do something for someone, or buy them a meal. Another thing is *mianzi*, like reputation. If you pay for my meal, I will feel like I don't have *mianzi*.

Z Or if your child goes to a good university, the father will have *mianzi* at work. Parents would always fight over the bill at dinner, because nobody wanted to lose *mianzi*.

X I don't understand all of this, why would I pay for others?

Z I do think life would be simpler if you don't have that.

B Yeah, we have so many expectations of other people. People get caged in a box of expectations.

X Class is also much more important in China.

22. What is the most interesting conversation you've had with a Dutch person

Z I think talking trash with Dutch people about other Dutch people is very funny. My Dutch friend was complaining about Dutch people splitting the bill.

B Yeah, I was also surprised when Dutch people were very surprised when I was using Chanel face wash, because it was very expensive. We just have different views on how to spend money.

X For me, I had a conversation with someone about what Dutch funerals are like. I learnt a lot. Apparently Dutch people don't buy tombs, because it's so expensive. They just cremate the body, and spread the ashes. And how can you remember someone if you just spread the ashes? Dutch people seem to have a more relaxed attitude towards death. In China, funerals are very noisy and extreme, so many people are there and everyone will have heard about your death, and every year people will go to your tomb. I also asked my Dutch roommate about funerals, and she is a Muslim. In her culture, it is not allowed to cremate a body. It was to be transported to the home country, and buried there.

23. Would you recommend the Netherlands to your friends as a place to study?

X Definitely. The weather is pretty okay, prices are not too high and people are very tolerant. You can live here comfortably and live a simple life.

B It depends on what they would want to study. Asian Studies or Law? I would definitely recommend them to come to Leiden. It's a chill lifestyle here. The schoolwork is a lot, but other than that, it's great to live here. If you have enough money, since the living cost is much higher than I expected.

Z I would recommend it, but it also depends on their personal situation. The schoolwork is quite a lot here, but the life is really peaceful.

Seventh interview: Lori (education PhD, 27)

1. When did you first come here?

November 2020.

2. Why did you choose the Netherlands?

Because I really wanted to choose a bilingual country. I wanted to learn another language, instead of just English. Canada and the Netherlands were my options. In the end, because of the pandemic and the relationship between the US and China, I decided to come here. Also, I got a really good scholarship from the Chinese government.

3. What did you know about the Netherlands before coming here?

Mills, tulips, bikes. That's all. I learnt how to ride a bike back in China, as a kid.

4. Do you speak some Dutch?

Yeah, that's why I have a language buddy through Chinastudies. We've been language partners for almost one year. I also get opportunities to talk Dutch with my colleagues. They treat me very well. Beforehand, I felt that I would not get treated well because of my Asian background, and of course the COVID pandemic. Because everybody knows COVID is from China. One of my colleagues texts me in Dutch every day, and another colleague really teaches me how to pronounce certain Dutch sounds. They help me all the time. My favorite Dutch phrase is "lekker ding". First, I thought lekker ding just meant a nice person. So that led to some awkward situations.

5. When you first came here, was there a big culture shock, so to say, was the Netherlands very different from what you expected?

Honestly, not really. Because, for me, I'm very outgoing and maybe a bit jumpy at times. I'm very easily scared, and I will respond very energetically. Most Chinese people don't like this, even my parents. Everybody expects me to behave in a graceful and gentle way, always wanting me to sit in one place with nothing but silence and a smile on my face. All these things are a reason that some Chinese people really hate me. "Why are you so talkative? Why are you so outgoing? Why can't you be quiet all the time?" So I think this is why I get along really well with my Dutch colleagues. I'm not scared of socializing with them, even though my Dutch is not so good and my English is not so good either.

6. What's your social network like here?

I have several friends. Some of my Chinese colleagues as well, besides my Dutch colleagues. Because I share a culture and background with those two Chinese colleagues, I feel like I can connect more easily with them. I also have another friend who works in the same building, who I met in the hallway. When I came here one year ago, there was something wrong with my apartment, so I had to find another place. There, I had a housemate who I am still friends with right now. I hang out with my Chinese friends on the weekends, and I like them a lot. During the weekdays, I interact with my Dutch colleagues and friends. In my free time, I take a painting course, or Dutch courses, or I just go to other cities with Chinese friends to see the country. If I'm very tired, I just stay at home, watch some TV shows to kill my time. I went to Rotterdam, Utrecht, Delft, Amsterdam, Haarlem, Maastricht. Also Texel. I would really like to visit some small villages, because I can always feel very peaceful and safe there. Overall, I feel the Netherlands is very safe. But mentally, I would feel more safe and secure in peaceful, small villages.

7. How do you like the nature here?

I like everything a lot, except for the weather. It rains a lot. I'm from Northern China, and my home town is really dry. So the weather here makes me really depressed. I prefer dry weather.

8. Were you anxious about the COVID situation in the Netherlands before coming here?

At first, I felt very worried. In China, they issued a very strict policy, but here it's not strict at all. That made me feel very worried, primarily about getting COVID and having to go to the hospital. But after some time, I felt things were pretty okay, I could go anywhere I wanted and did not have to worry about COVID at all. I wasn't even fully vaccinated at that time.

9. Did you go back to China during your time here?

No. It was possible, but I didn't, because that would mean I'd have to go into quarantine for a whole month. The plane tickets are also very expensive.

10. What was it like to experience the pandemic in China?

I think it was pretty okay, since my hometown was not affected that much. Maybe 200 people got COVID. Everything was okay. For me, I just stayed at home for one or two months, since the government issued a very strict policy to keep the pandemic as contained as possible. I do think I understand the policy in China. The Chinese population is so huge, it's impossible to ask everyone to keep 1.5m distance. The only thing they can do is to ask everyone to stay at home. So I agree with the Chinese policy.

11. So how do you feel the Dutch government has handled the pandemic over here?

I think it's still okay, because here there are not many people compared to China. People can still keep their distance. The situation in the Netherlands allows for having not that strict of a policy.

12. What do you think are the biggest differences in COVID policy between the Netherlands and China?

Difficult to say. The difference is that the Chinese government is always trying to achieve the zero-case goal. If there is one case in China, that will be a very big deal. But the government in the Netherlands is very relaxed, and they're okay with everything.

13. To what extent did you understand all the regulations?

I understood all of them, since it's based on a different social context.

14. How were these regulations communicated to you as a foreign exchange student?

I got all of my information through WeChat groups and channels that you can subscribe to. Daily updates were communicated through those channels.

15. Did you think that the Dutch government changed their mind a lot throughout the development of their policy?

No, not really. As far as I know, the Chinese government has a very clear and strict policy. But here, it's more like: "Okay, you're not allowed to go out after 10". I think it's okay. It's not a big lockdown. Sometimes I think it's very weird. Why do people here really want to go to parties? For Chinese people, it's very easy. We always do everything online, so online social contact is perfectly okay for us, even before the pandemic. That's why no one complained when the government asked us to stay at home. We have our WiFi, computers and mobile phones, that's enough for Chinese people. I know my Dutch colleagues are very active on WhatsApp. I think I'm active as well, if you text me I will be there right away. But I stay away from Facebook and Instagram, or other social media.

Do you think talking to someone online is just as fulfilling as meeting them in person?

No. I really changed after coming here. When I was still in China, online contact was totally okay for me. But after having spent some time here, and interacting with my Dutch colleagues, I feel I prefer face to face a lot more.

And where do you live, may I ask?

Very close to the city center.

16. Do you think the government could improve the way in which they communicate the pandemic regulations to exchange students?

I think it's impossible for the Dutch government to communicate all the regulations in Chinese. They already did everything in English. So we, as Chinese, prefer to get all the information through WeChat, because it's already in Chinese. A lot of other people check the website, but we are just waiting for the WeChat message. It's very convenient for us, but also makes us lazy.

17. When you were here, and the lockdown in December started, did that cause a shift in contact preference?

At the start, I did not have any Dutch colleagues. Luckily, my supervisor introduced me to a lot of people. I met these people online, and when we finally met offline we already felt like we had a strong connection. So I definitely think that the pandemic really forced me to build a nice, social network myself, with Dutch people. To tell you the truth, I have actually grown tired of socializing with Chinese people a bit. When two people share a similar cultural background, it's very easy for you to misunderstand each other and interpret things in a very different way (because you have certain expectations caused by the assumptions pertaining to that cultural background?). I do something because I like it. There are no ulterior motives there. And those Chinese people misinterpreted my actions. (So I feel I can't really be myself among them?) I met some Chinese people during my time here. Some of them I like, some of them I don't like. So I just stopped socializing with them. I can't pretend to be nice to someone if I don't like them. So maybe that's more the Dutch way of life than the Chinese way of life. People always say Dutch people are very direct. But I don't feel that way, because I am also very direct (as a Chinese person?).

Do you think you are very different from Chinese people, in general?

No, because I still have a lot of Chinese friends. Some of them really like me, and some of them don't.

18. What were the most challenging things you encountered in your daily life?

Academic life, writing papers, finishing my PhD. I had a very hard time. One month ago, I was finishing my first study. It was very rough. Luckily, my Dutch colleagues were a big source of support. Besides that, interpersonal relationships were also very hard. So when I have a hard time socializing with Chinese friends, I just switch to Dutch friends, and then I get blamed by my Chinese friends that I just want to keep a close relationship with my Dutch colleagues so that I can use them. My Chinese friends think everybody should be very cold and independent, they don't understand why I treat my Dutch colleagues so nicely. They immediately think I want something back from them, and they feel I'm shameless. It's very complicated.

19. Do you think Dutch people are easy to connect with?

Definitely! Precisely because we have a lot of cultural differences, we can be more forgiving towards one another. It's funny to tease each other with this, when you behave differently than others because you can't help it due to your different cultural background. I think Dutch people would get blamed more by other Dutch people for not displaying certain social etiquettes, since they should know they are expected to behave like that. Just like I am judged by my Chinese friends for not adhering to certain Chinese behavioral expectations. So Dutch people are very tolerant towards me.

20. Do you have a strong wish to connect with Dutch people, and do you feel it's an important part of your stay here?

At first, I didn't really have any motivation to make friends with Dutch people. But later, I felt I had a hard time connecting with Chinese people. That really motivated me to get out of the box, and socialize with other people and nationalities. At that point, I thought it was very important to connect with Dutch people. One of my colleagues told me he was going to take me out to a bar, which I really look forward to as I am excited to experience new things related to local life here.

21. How do you feel Dutch people responded to the lockdown?

I don't know. I didn't know any Dutch people during the first lockdown. But at the last lockdown, all of my friends felt very disappointed. All of my colleagues follow the rules very strictly. I don't know about other Dutch people. Maybe because my colleagues are well educated, they think it's important to follow the rules and take responsibility. As for people on the street and supermarket, I'm too shy to correct people if they don't wear their face mask, or not correctly. That's their business, all I can do is wear my face mask the right way. I am often even too shy to complain about things. Whenever I do want to complain, I prefer talking to my male colleagues, since they are easier to talk to.

22. Were you very surprised by any COVID regulations here?

Yeah! When you sit down in class or a restaurant, you don't have to wear your face mask. But whenever you walk around, you do have to wear it. Why is that? Why don't I have to wear my face mask when I sit? The virus is still there. I don't understand it at all.

23. Did you have COVID yourself?

No, not to my knowledge.

24. How has the lockdown influenced your study performance?

It was okay. I could just write my papers at home.

25. How has the lockdown influenced your mental health?

I felt very bad during the first lockdown. I couldn't go out, and that made me feel very depressed. But I didn't go out that much, so it could have been worse.

26. Was there any discrimination towards you as a Chinese student?

From my colleagues, no. But on the streets, some people were screaming at me. Something about face masks? I think most Dutch people are very nice.

27. How do you feel your Chinese identity influences your social position in the Netherlands?

Maybe that's not really a thing. I just feel language is the most important factor and obstacle here. Not being able to speak Dutch is the most challenging thing for me, and that really affects my ability to get involved. No other barriers in my life here. That's also because most of my friends are very well educated, so they won't judge me for being Chinese.

28. Do you feel you or Chinese students in general have a different position than students of other nationalities?

No, just language. Maybe there's a difference between Asian students and Western students? Maybe white students socialize with each other more easily, because they look similar to each other.

29. Did your time abroad make you more aware of your Chinese background and identity?

No. I don't think so. I know I'm a foreigner. I know I'm Chinese. Hmm. Okay. Maybe, I can feel there is a difference between me and my Dutch contacts. For example, some classes my Dutch contacts thought were awful, but I really liked them. I prefer lectures I can follow on my own, instead of classes with a lot of group discussion.

30. If you had to give a definition or short description of Chinese identity, what would it be?

I don't know. This question is too big and general. Maybe just being able to speak Chinese and upholding traditional Chinese values? Having a close relationship with your family? But my Chinese identity is different from others, because I am so outgoing. I uphold traditional values, but I am not that traditional. I at times feel I am very progressive. For example, I think I really want to experience more new things. But in China, people are more focused on finding a place to settle down, get a job and get married. These are the wishes my parents have for me. But I want to challenge myself and experience new things. At the same time, I feel I just can't forget all about my parents and leave them be. I feel like I am really struggling and caught between these two things.

Do you sometimes feel like you have two different identities?

It's funny you should ask that. I'm a Gemini. And those people always have multiple personalities. I struggle all the time, and overthink a lot of things. I can't make decisions. I do plan on going back to China after my studies, for my parents. That's pretty much one of the only things I'm really sure of. As well as the fact that I am fully Chinese

31. Do you feel like you're treated as a Chinese person, or as an Asian person when you're here?

Definitely Chinese. I can't even tell the difference between Japanese, Korean or Chinese people.

32. Did your time in the Netherlands influence your view of China?

I didn't think of this before. Hmm... maybe not? I don't care about political issues that much. I only care about my hometown and family.

And what about your personal values?

Maybe marriage? Before I thought marriage was an important thing in life. But now I feel you can just live with someone, and you do not need a contract for keeping the relationship intact. Besides that, my Dutch colleagues taught me the concept of taking my own responsibility. In China, rules are very strict and people will judge you harshly if you don't follow them. This is the main thing that

forces you to follow the rules. But here, people will care less. You can do what you want. But we don't, because we have to take our own responsibility. This will stay with me for the rest of my life.

33. What are the most important differences between the Netherlands and China, do you think?

One is big, one is small. Life in China is much faster, people are always doing a lot of things. Life here is slower and peaceful, people follow their own flow more easily. People in China never rest or take time for themselves. Shops are always closed on Sunday morning here. In China, no shops will close on the weekend. I prefer the Dutch life, since people can always take a rest when they want to.

34. What's the most stereotypical Dutch thing, in your view?

Going Dutch. Or people complaining about how tired they are, and just want to go to the bar.

35. Would you recommend the Netherlands to your friends back home as a good place for studying?

Definitely.

Eighth & ninth interview: Burt & Wendy

1. When did you first come here to the Netherlands?

W January 2019, for me.

B September 2019 for me.

2. What do you study?

W I had a pre-bachelor in Amsterdam first, and then a bachelor of International Studies in Leiden.

B I study business and administration.

3. Do you plan on staying here after graduation?

W Yes. I think we both prefer to stay in the Netherlands. That's what I found out when we first started dating, it was very important to me that we have the same future plan.

4. Why did you choose to study in the Netherlands?

W I first came to the Netherlands when I was 23 and I wanted to do a bachelor and master's here. There are so many English courses here, and it's a lot cheaper than other countries. The UK and US were going through a political transformation around that time, so I didn't feel comfortable there.

B For me, the reason is that the Netherlands is very international. Everyone speaks English. At the same time, I wanted to learn a third language. Personally, I love Amsterdam, I really wanted to live there. It's more free here, I can have my freedom here. That's the main reason. People respect each other. I have lived here for a long time, I don't go to other cities, so I don't know what it's like in other cities.

W I also think that his university application being accepted at Amsterdam is also a reason why he chose to live there.

5. Do you speak Dutch?

W We learned some during last summer, but it slipped away already. We don't really get a lot of opportunities to speak Dutch, but we still take classes.

B Yeah, of course we have to speak Dutch, we are living here, it's the basic form of respect to the local culture. It's also convenient in daily life, like when going to the supermarket. The grammar and pronunciation are so different from English, it's really difficult.

W For me, I don't think it's that difficult. I learned French before, and I can see some similarities. But I haven't invested that much time yet.

6. What did you know about the Netherlands before coming here?

W Well, of course I was here before during my Eurotrip. I only saw Amsterdam during that time. It didn't help in letting me get to know the Netherlands. At that time, I suppose I only knew about tulips and the Red Light District.

B I was in the US first, and after coming here I can make a comparison. I think it's much better here, except for the weather. People and culture are so nice here. It's a nice place.

W, what were the main differences you experienced from your trip and after living here?

W Well, it was so superficial when I first came here. But after living here, where you have a lot of daily life interactions, I found that people are so punctual and organized here. So I got a calendar, and got more organized myself. People are also so friendly here. Not in the way that they smile at you on the street, but in the way that if you fall off your bike or experience other difficulties, people will come and help you. It made me feel really safe as an Asian woman. After COVID, when everyone was wearing masks, I realized people have difficulties understanding my English. That bothered me a bit.

And what do you feel are the biggest differences between the US and Netherlands?

B In the US, as an Asian person, Asian communities have already been established pretty well. But here, the communities are not as united as in some places in the US. Here, when COVID just started, racism became quite serious. That made me very upset. The good side is that people are still getting united.

W We both are in this anti-Asian-racism WeChat group. There are 260 people there. Every time you get discriminated against, so many people will respond and help by asking where you are, which city you are in, and give you a contact number of a police officer that will help you. So this gives a sense of community, but it's mostly young people that are active in this area. Most old people don't really mingle much with Dutch society, I feel like, but I could be wrong. The older generation also doesn't have this mindset of coming up for their own rights, they mostly focus on protecting their children, and don't put a lot of thought into coming up for themselves in a country where they don't belong.

7. I noticed that you mostly talk about Asian communities, not Chinese communities. Why is that?

W When we went to the Stop Asian Hate protest in the Hague, I don't remember if I saw other people than Chinese.

B I saw some people there from Thailand or South Korea, and some other countries. But when we go abroad, we're not Chinese. We're all Asian people.

W And for me, in my programme, there were very few Chinese people, so everytime I see Chinese people, I am always very surprised, and we share our experiences. That causes us to grow closer, and keep in touch.

Do you always immediately recognize which Asian country people are from?

W definitely. But other people always ask us where we're from, they can't tell we're from China. I feel it's very easy to tell. In very rare cases, not so much.

8. What's your social network like here?

W I live in the Hague, so my social network is mainly from my university. Classmates, colleagues. It's a mix of nationalities. Before dating him, I didn't have a lot of Chinese friends, and was not really involved in the Chinese community. After we started dating, I came to Amsterdam more often, I even lived here for a couple of months, and I started to get to know more Chinese people. But we didn't get very close.

B For me, my networking circle is quite international. I want to get to know Dutch society a lot more. I also use Temper, which is a new app and company in the Netherlands, which allows me to work in a lot of different places. They all speak Dutch, and I can understand a lot of what they're saying. Most of my friends are my colleagues. But they're all temporary colleagues, because I only work somewhere for three to four days. Most of my Chinese contacts are my neighbors. But I don't want to speak Chinese a lot, since I really want to improve my Dutch.

W Also, most Chinese people here are not the kind of people I want to become friends with.

B Even in China, cultural backgrounds amongst different people can be so different. Here, life is much more free and simple. My mindset is very different from that of most Chinese people here.

W So, he is from the Northwest part of China, and people are much more generous there. They don't care about money there, they care about brotherhood and generosity.

B Most of our people are minorities, where I'm from, next to XJ.

9. How was your social network influenced by the pandemic?

W For me, I went back to China for a year, from March 2020 til April 2021. During that time, I still had a lot of contact with friends back here. Back in China, I was hanging out a lot with my Chinese friends.

B At first, life was quite tough. Everything was closed, you can't go out, just stay at home. The place where I was living at that time only had a few people. I felt very depressed for the first month of the lockdown. Of course you could go outside at that time, but there were racist people on the street. But after two months, when the COVID numbers were getting stable, me and my friends started hanging out again. During the lockdown, I still worked every day. I also made new friends during COVID. I met them at work. I worked at a restaurant for quite a while, but when that closed I worked for a company in Amsterdam. They created the temporary job system to fill the employment shortage caused by COVID among different companies. I also believe that if you want to reach the top, you have to start at the bottom. I don't have a favorite job of all of those, I do it for living in the moment and making more friends.

W He also mingles very easily with other people. I can't do that, because I am very awkward and don't speak Dutch.

B I also worked for a company that provides food for the airlines. I worked there as a cook, and after three days they offered me a long term contract. I felt very flattered, but since I had different goals for the future, I didn't want to accept. The pay was very good, like 20 euros per hour.

10. W, did you go back to China because of the lockdown?

W Yes, because at that time it felt like everyone was escaping back home. I also kept track of other countries, and the day other countries shut down the schools I had a strong feeling that I had to go home immediately, before the prices went sky high. When I came back to the Netherlands in April 2021, I remember feeling very afraid, and I asked people from the WeChat group if people wanted to go outside with me because I didn't want to walk the streets alone. I remember being very scared of a group of teenage boys eating their lunch in front of my window, because I lived on the ground floor at that time. But now that I'm dating, and society has become more stable, I feel much more safe.

And what was the lockdown like, back in China?

W The reason I went back to the Netherlands in January 2020 was also because I wanted to escape the COVID situation in China. But when I came here, and COVID started in March 2020, I was shocked by how nobody was taking the situation seriously, nobody was wearing their face masks. My friend in China told me that the situation in my hometown was fine, told me that I should just come there, that there was no lockdown there. I came there, and just everything was completely normal. You could go out, do whatever you wanted. And when I shared my hometown experience on Instagram, all of my European friends were so surprised that I could just live a normal life there.

And why did you come back to the Netherlands in April 2021?

W I originally planned to just come back here, sell my stuff, give up my apartment. I heard a lot of bad things about the situation in the Netherlands, about rising Asian racism and people not wearing their face masks. At the same time, I also felt very safe and comfortable in the Netherlands. When I came back, I found an internship, and decided to stay. Then, I met him, and we started dating. I had a flight planned back to China in June, and because our relationship developed more I ended up not going back at all.

B I didn't go back to China at all, because the prices to fly back were crazy. I feel like the government didn't do anything to help our people. I felt really upset. And you have to quarantine for a month, it's crazy.

W In most of the quarantine hotels, you can't even open the windows. The Chinese government didn't only not help us to come back, but they also canceled an entire flight if only one person was tested positive.

11. Did you feel scared because of the pandemic?

B Not really. At first, of course, yes, in the beginning phase I was scared because I didn't know why such a disease made the whole world panic. But when more and more classmates got infected, and recovered in two weeks, I started to realize there was no need to panic.

W And what we learned from the Chinese media, this was supposed to be some deadly disease. But over here, we saw that it was not that extreme.

B My mother is a doctor, and in 2003 there was SARS in China. She was a doctor for the military. I would secretly pass by her hospital building, to wave at her, because she had to live there for long periods.

12. How do you feel the Dutch government has handled the pandemic?

B At first, it was slow, compared to other countries. But as time goes by, it feels good, because you still have freedom and do whatever you want.

W We went to Portugal last summer, and we noticed we were being so Dutch by not wearing our masks, while all people there, including the tourists, were being so careful. And during the first three months, the government was really trying to let people know that they were not being forced to do anything, and everyone kept their freedom of choice. They were not being guided by the government, the government was not showing them scientific proof that masks are useful, so people kept holding their opinion that they did not know whether or not masks are useful. But in China, masks are very common. People wear them every time, when you're sick, have an allergy, or if your make up is not right. I feel the Dutch government can do a bit better. I also understand that they don't want to sacrifice the economy that much. But Germany and Belgium contained the virus, while retaining economic growth. They handled the situation better.

B At first, they said they were not sure about the validity of wearing masks. But you can't say that it's useless. And then only months later, masks were required in the public area. This doesn't make sense.

W This policy came too late. They could have enacted this policy way before. When I came to China in March 2020, everyone was so well-protected. Some Chinese students were even wearing protective

suits (HAZMAT?). So you can really see how different information really can determine people's actions.

B Yeah, but the good thing is you retain your freedom. You can choose whether or not to protect yourself. It's your own health, you can choose whether or not you wear a face mask. If I don't care about that, or am not scared about COVID, I can just choose not to do those things.

W I don't really agree with him. I do agree, it's your personal choice. but there are more vulnerable people out there who probably don't even have any health protection. Like unregistered workers from other countries, or old people, and those people are put at risk because of other people's irresponsible behavior. I do think the way in which the Chinese government has handled it is a bit too extreme. But the way they put it, is that they sacrifice the freedom of a small group of people for a short time to ensure that the whole society functions well. It's not that I agree with that, but I do feel the Dutch society could go a bit more in that direction. It's easy for us to say that we want our freedom, we want to go clubbing, cafes, nightlife, but what about the others? It's a transmitted virus. You spread it. Oftentimes, young people don't suffer at all, but others do because they get infected.

13. And how did the regulations here differ from those in China?

W I feel like the regulations here are very temporary, temporary and extreme. They close down everything for three weeks, especially during the Christmas season last year, which creates a panic and rush. People feel they need to buy everything in one day. I don't think that's healthy. It's all very short-term. They don't really think about the long-term. The pattern is: in the summer it's getting better, and in the winter they shut down everything.

B I think, in China the regulations are like: if there are one or two cases, they test the whole city. In China, that does make sense. But here, the numbers are scarily high. What I saw was that the society was still going on as usual. You can see the numbers are very high. It doesn't make sense. They do so much work in China for only two cases, but here they do nothing even though there are so many cases..

W Here in Europe, people are starting to co-exist with the virus. But the mainstream news is still creating a panic surrounding the virus.

B I think that different regulations also affect people's different thoughts about the virus. Because in China, right now, the government regulations are too strict, so people will think that it will be very serious if they get COVID. They think they might die. But here, COVID created more of a problem in the economy of the society, but getting COVID, for most people, is physically not a big deal.

W I got COVID myself, but I did not tell my parents because they would freak out. I took some medicine, and then recovered after 5 or 6 days.

B It's interesting, she did not tell her parents, but she did tell her Dutch friends. They all thought it was fine. But her Chinese friends were super worried. The fun fact is that people in China are already doubtful about this situation, about why people in China are so serious about the situation while in other countries people and the situation seems much more relaxed.

W I do think there is a lot of misinformation as well, not just concerning COVID. I spotted a lot of exaggerated news concerning COVID, and Russia vs Ukraine. So sometimes, I feel very weird when looking at the information both inside and outside China.

14. Did you at all times understand all the regulations concerning COVID, and understand what you had to do, and understood all the reasoning behind the regulations?

W Definitely. We got all of the information concerning the regulations from both Dutch news and Chinese channels. I do think it can be better, I'm not super satisfied with it.

B For me, it's hard to tell. I heard all about it from other people. I didn't even know where to search for the regulations. I always learnt from it when someone posted about it in the group chat.

W, how could it be better?

W It could be more consistent, so that people can prepare for it better, mentally. I'm not voting for the extreme Chinese policy, but I do feel there can be more policies that we can stick to. Like masks indoors and keeping our distance. But then they start lifting those regulations, and people behave like COVID is over. But it's not done yet, we're still in it. I have a Korean friend, who is very careful with COVID, and she still got it. I even got it. It's very widespread.

B I didn't get it. I don't know why, because we were living together when she got COVID. Maybe I got it already before she got it.

15. Do you feel the Dutch government could improve the way in which they communicate the regulations to international students here?

W I didn't really think about it before you mentioned it, but yes.

B Definitely. For example, the university of Amsterdam only emails you when there is a regulation change related to education. But here, in my community, my campus will email me when there is a regulation change.

W One thing they could do is co-operate with all other universities, because that is where all international students are. They should send an email in English with all the regulations. It's very difficult sometimes, because we have to translate Dutch to English. So oftentimes, we just ask our friends what's going on.

I see that the Dutch government website also has the information page in English.

B Oh. I didn't know.

Do you actively search for new information regarding the lockdown?

W No, not really.

And B, during your time here, during the lockdown, you got most of your contacts through work, right?

B Yes, I knew most people through work then. I think, because of COVID, people are more willing to interact with others and make more friends. That's a good result of the pandemic.

16. Did you find you wanted to contact friends and family back home more because of the lockdown and social isolation?

B No. It's strange, because of COVID-19 I felt I needed to contact them more. But I didn't, because every time I contacted them, I felt more depressed, because they didn't really understand what was going on here. The contact with them was lessened, but I made more friends over here. The regulations are too different here, and that really affects a person's mind. If I talk too much with my parents, they get too worried.

W I remember, after getting back to the Netherlands, I sometimes go out and put a picture on WeChat, and a very common comment I got from friends in China was why I wasn't wearing a mask.

B Before COVID, I always wanted to go out, I was a real party animal. After the pandemic, I got really used to staying home and enjoying that. I didn't feel the need to contact others a lot.

W The division between wanting to go out and stay home became more even for him, because of COVID.

B We still go out, mostly on weekends, but I really enjoy staying home. I also heard that, in the future, most companies will employ the working-at-home method. So it's not just me, a lot of people have really gotten used to staying home.

17. What are the most challenging things you encountered in your daily life?

B Tuition pay. We all take courses online, we don't go to campus and use resources, but we still pay the full tuition fee. This doesn't make sense. This is really bad, it's the thing I feel most negative

about among all the regulations. They should really do something about this. I heard that other universities have reduced fees. UVA didn't do anything. This is directly linked to my daily life, because it forced me to work all those Temper daytime jobs. As an international student, I understand we pay higher tuition fees, but why during COVID? Universities are like companies, they don't care about actual student's lives. This really makes my daily life tougher. Under Dutch law, I also can't work a lot as a student. That's why I formed my own company, so I can work more.

Does this make you feel more excluded here?

B Yeah, a little bit. It's not great, but it's okay. I've been through worse things. It's not a big deal.

We're still very grateful towards Dutch society. We live here, study here, and enjoy ourselves.

W I don't think there are any challenges in my daily life. If I had to pick one thing, it's that I have to translate an important letter from the Dutch government. It's very annoying. I used Google Translate or asked my friends. It's still doable, but just not that convenient.

18. Do you feel a strong wish to connect to Dutch people?

W Not really. I feel it needs to happen naturally, as well as both-ways. It would not work if only I wanted to connect. When I first moved out of China, I was living in New Zealand. I remember having a strong wish to connect to local people at that time, to integrate better and feel less excluded. Now, I'm more comfortable with myself. I do have some very good Dutch friends, and I got them in a very natural way.

B I have a very similar answer. I want to connect with Dutch friends as well, but it should happen in a natural way.

Do you think it's an important part of socially integrating here?

W For me, no. Because we have a lot of international friends here. I think that's what makes it less important for us to be friends with Dutch people.

B That's also because I'm living in Amsterdam. Maybe it's different in other Dutch cities.

W No, in The Hague as well. It's a very international city. He really has a bias towards other places than Amsterdam.

19. Do you think Dutch people are easy to connect with?

W No. But it also really depends. I encountered some very young Dutch people who weren't very open minded. I also encountered some people who have been out of Europe. I think that is one very important thing to determine if someone is open minded. My major is international studies. There are a lot of people who take track of Asia, South East Asia, or Africa, so it's quite easy to connect with those Dutch people. That also depends, though. In my work, my internship, there were some Dutch people who I really had a hard time connecting with. Which I also understand, because it's a business setting. But you can really tell the difference between them and other people.

B It really depends. It's the same all over the world, no matter where you are. It really depends on the situation and person. If you have similar interests, it's easier to connect. So far, most people I met have been really friendly and easy to connect to. We also share similar hobbies. Every time I talk to a Dutch person, and show a big interest in learning Dutch, they are so happy and excited to teach you Dutch. I think it's easier to connect to Dutch people than to Chinese people. When I was at a party, Chinese people thought it was weird that I was talking to them. But here, it's so normal.

20. How do you feel Dutch people responded to the lockdown and regulations?

W They complain a lot. I don't think they see it as a way that helps the society as a whole. They are more suspicious towards the government's regulations. More critical as well. This doesn't exist in China, at least not on the public surface, where the population openly criticizes the government's policy.

B Here, a lot of protests happen. Violent ones, too. That's one thing I don't understand. I don't get why they make it violent. To me, it's overreacting. But I don't know their thoughts.

W Once, I passed my Museumplein in Amsterdam. I saw this group of people that was protesting against the lockdown. When I saw them, I immediately got the feeling that I did not want to be friends with them.

B You remind me of something. Some people are really stupid. In Hilversum, there were a lot of posters that said GEEN CHINEES.

W It spread to The Hague and Rotterdam as well.

B It's fucking stupid to hate one group of people. If you hate the Chinese government, then hate the government. Not the entire population.

W One day, when I was living behind The Hague Central Station, I saw a protest at a square. I saw this big protest sign that said "Maak China van Nederland". I approached them, and in a friendly way asked them what they were protesting for. They told me that they don't want the Chinese way of doing things to influence the Netherlands. For example, the need for a QR code to get in basic restaurants, that's a violation of human rights. I asked them what that's got to do with China, and he told me that China is the reason behind this QR code system. So I said: "You're against the Chinese government then, not Chinese people?" He completely agreed. I said: "I understand where you're coming from. But to other Chinese people, imagine how they feel when they see your sign. Because it makes them feel unwelcome, it seems like you're protesting against Chinese people." He listened, and said he would talk to the other people in the group. I told him that an efficient way to deliver his message was to not create this hostile feeling between two groups. He really cared about what I had to say, also because I first listened to him, and then delivered a constructive opinion.

21. What specific COVID regulation really surprised you?

W I think there were a lot. During that time, my international friends and I would talk about all the regulations and really disagree with them. But after a certain time, I sort of forgot about them. I can't remember a specific one.

B I didn't understand the prohibition of alcohol sales after 8. Also the opening of only essential shops, while restaurants had to stay closed.

W I also remember one where you could only sit at a restaurant table with people from your household.

B I didn't know that.

W I think curfew was the one that surprised me the most. I was also very surprised they didn't enforce mandatory face masks in the beginning. So I guess I'm more surprised by what they haven't done instead of what they did do.

Anything else you feel they really should have done?

W Another thing is that Schiphol has become the main gathering and transfer point for people that were flying over. This also increased the transmit rate for new COVID variants here in Amsterdam, because of the loose regulations in the airport. But then they got a new regulation, where people had to take a test on arrival, and if they are tested positive they stay in a hotel until they test negative. At that point, they are sent back to their country of departure. I saw this Chinese girl who flew over Amsterdam, and she got stuck here for a month or two while trying to get back to China. There was another group of Chinese people stuck in the Netherlands during the breakout of the war in Ukraine. They canceled all flights to Asian territories. So 130 Chinese people were living in the airport for three days, until finally the Chinese government stepped in and helped them.

B I didn't pay a lot of attention to the regulations. I feel that everytime they come up with new regulations, nothing really changes. It's all pretty much the same. One thing was that they closed down the coffee shops for two days.

22. Has your study performance been influenced by the pandemic?

B I think it has been improved, because everything happened online. Some courses are shifted from offline format to online, and the content is quite different and easier. I also delayed my graduation. I was supposed to graduate last year, but I just graduated last month. The influence on my studies is that I extended my study, spent extra time and money. Also, when you're writing your thesis you can talk to your supervisor face to face. But not now.

W For me it's similar, but in terms of money it's less severe. I was able to go back to China, and because of the time difference between China and the Netherlands, I could just do my own thing during the day, and work on my studies at night. I also realized that I did not want to do my career in China. My academic performance really increased, as well. I was more relaxed.

B I prefer interacting with my teacher face to face. So I lost my passion for my studies a bit during COVID. I had a really hard time writing my thesis.

23. What about your mental health?

B At first, it was not very great. But it got better and better, especially after I met her. I was angry all the time before that, since COVID. Also, there's a lot of things you can do in the city center. It's quieter now in Amsterdam, because there are far less tourists. I really like this.

W He was really struggling before, with his anger and thesis. This got so much better after we met. We met through ACSSNL. I would never join this kind of organization before COVID, but now I thought it would be a good way to meet new people.

B Same for me, that's why I joined the association in both Leiden and Amsterdam. This association, with all its fun activities, really improved my mental health.

W Ever since I came to the Netherlands, my mental health has been quite good. I never really had a major problem, even during the COVID time. A bit afraid, a bit insecure, but with no big effects on my life. My Asian friends had some racist experience, either from old white men, or young boys.

24. What about your personal experience with discrimination in the Netherlands?

W I didn't experience a lot of obvious racism. Last month, I went to the snackbar to buy some fries, and while I was waiting this guy from Suriname, a friend of the owner, made an Asian face with fingers and eyes. I didn't react at the time, but it did not feel right. I talked about this with another Chinese friend of mine. She's pretty similar to me, she speaks English very well and can come on pretty strong and likes to express her opinion. She told me that she always walks very quickly in the streets. If she would get shouted at in the street, she would definitely reply. Just like me. I also have this Japanese friend, she's 23 but looks like a very young girl. She receives a lot of discrimination. She really wants to leave here, always looking for other ways to escape.

B There was one time when I was called the N word by a delivery guy. I am Asian. Why use the N word? I did not know how to react. I think he was not right in the head. It was really weird.

W I also remember one other thing. I was working in the marketing department of a hotel. The first day, all interns were helping the guests to check in, and there was this family checking in. All of us were in an elevator together. I started a conversation with them. They asked me where I was from, and when I said I was from China, one of them immediately covered their nose and mouth. I didn't say anything, because it was my first day. I felt really weird afterwards, talked to my supervisor about this, and the hotel manager immediately found out who this family was. The manager told them they could not get the room anymore, and after that the family apologized to me.

Are Dutch people very curious about your background?

W They ask a lot about the government, but that has nothing to do with us. We're not responsible for them. I think Chinese culture is very beautiful, and I think other people should see this separately from the government.

25. How do you feel your Chinese background and identity influence your social position here?

W Very good and interesting question. When I was 18, I felt very insecure about my Chinese identity. Now, it has created a very interesting contrast. People hold certain stereotypes about you. But when you start talking to them, and get closer to them, it breaks their stereotype. That makes a really strong impression. I started to use this as an advantage, instead of a disadvantage.

B Yes. You can at least change the image of our people.

W I think we get that comment a lot. Once, we went to get some coffee. And the owner told us that other Chinese people would not greet him. They were not interested in small talk, they only got their coffee. We were very open.

B We treat everyone nicely, if they treat us the same way.

What view do most Dutch people have of Chinese, in your experience?

W Quiet. Not sharing their own opinions. Not very social. Always gathering together. Not so fun. A bit nerdy. Doesn't speak good English.

Do you agree with any of these?

B Of course, if they have some certain stereotypes, some of them I can agree with. Mostly nerdy. Because in our country, studying well is the only way to lead a better life.

26. Do you feel you have a different social position than students of other nationalities?

W I would say Chinese are definitely not the most popular crowd here. People are more interested in Korean and Japanese culture, because the soft power of those countries is much stronger. People who are not so familiar with Asian culture will definitely have some misconceptions. As for people from other countries, social life will be pretty similar to the differences between the Netherlands and China.

B I think it also depends on the size of the student group.

27. Has your stay here made you more aware of your Chinese identity?

W Definitely. I think national identity only comes across when you clash with other nationalities or races. Back in China, you mostly just mingle with Chinese people. We do have some minorities, and there's a big difference there. But because I have lived outside of China previously, I have already dealt with that identity crisis.

Is this a positive thing?

B Yes. I can think more independently.

W It definitely brings you a different angle to look at things.

B Before, I only met Chinese people. But here, I meet a lot of people from different cultural backgrounds. You look differently at your own culture.

W You reflect a lot more. You get a more in depth understanding of your own culture, through interaction with other cultures. Among the Chinese people here, I recognize the 18 year old me who was struggling in New Zealand. It's quite common that I realize that other people are not so confident about their Chinese identity. This is because China plays such a radical role in the world stage of today.

Do you feel proud of your Chinese identity?

W More. A lot more than before.

B Before, we were scared. We saw ourselves a lot more as being part of our government. Now, we can see ourselves more separately from the government. I love my country. I love being Chinese. Because of our culture, not because of our government.

W I think what he means is that before, there was an equation between him and the government. But now, it's not there anymore. He doesn't represent the government. For me, yes! I remember before, when people asked me where I was from, I was very afraid of this question. I didn't want to answer that. But when you mingle with people, this is one of the first things people ask you. I was not comfortable, and if people ask me: "Did you grow up in China? Are you from Hong Kong? Are you from overseas?" I was happy to hear those questions then, because it meant I was not closely associated with being Chinese. It was not something I was so proud of back then. But now, I have created my own image of what it means to be Chinese. When I become more mature and more confident, more comfortable in my own skin, I find it doesn't define who I am anymore. It's a positive thing.

28. How would you define "being Chinese"?

W I had this conversation with a Taiwanese girl a week ago, a mutual friend. When we met, I remember I said something about something along the lines of: "Oh, that's Chinese culture." I immediately felt the concern that I might have offended her. Because I know that most Hong Kong and Taiwanese people don't want to be labeled as Chinese. But she did not feel offended. She liked to be labeled as Chinese. She speaks Chinese, reads and writes Chinese, we speak the same language, and we share a similar culture. So she was totally okay with that. That really surprised me, and makes me really think about this whole question. There are Malaysian Chinese, Indonesian Chinese, even American Chinese. I do feel like it's more culturally related. For example, if you grow up in the US, in a Chinese family, you get really immersed in that Chinese culture while growing up. For those people who define themselves as Chinese, I would really agree with that.

B I would say that, in China, we are Chinese. But we only have one shared voice, the government's voice. But since coming here, we have our own voice, we can think independently. I can be Chinese, and myself here. But in China, I am Chinese and everyone. I am seen as the same as others. But here, I am different. I can be myself.

W I feel like individualism is not really encouraged in Chinese society. It's getting a lot better now, due to outside influence. But growing up, I learned that people were really scared of being special. So sometimes, I felt I had to hide how I'm different from others. So I understand what he's saying. In China, every individual is kind of blurred, because the Chinese government really prefers a group of people pushing towards a common goal that benefits everyone. They don't care how you feel as an individual. This was emphasized a lot when we grew up. You sacrifice yourself for the bigger group. You will be labeled as selfish if you don't think about the community. It's still going on, especially with the pandemic. If a nurse dies, they really glorify her as a hero who sacrificed herself for the community.

B That really explains why China has their COVID policy, there's a whole philosophy behind it.

Here in the Netherlands, people are so sensitive about their personal space. They get so mean when they feel other people are not taking their COVID safety into consideration.

W That's something I really miss about China. In China, people don't yell at each other in stores. It usually happens when I go to a clothing store. I try something on, and other customers will approach me and tell me how it looks on me.

B, with regards to what you said about being Chinese and yourself here, do you also feel that you have two different identities?

B Not really. In China, I still have the same identity. But here, I can more openly speak out my own opinion without having to contain myself. I still have to be careful when I interact with other Chinese people here, though.

W Yeah, so, some of the people we met at ACSSNL are very pro-party, so we have to constantly remind ourselves to avoid the sensitive topics and not speak out our opinions.

B Because in China, the government is monitoring everyone. So if you talk negatively, you will get into trouble. I still care about our society and our people, and I want the situation in China to change. I'm still doing the same thing, but now I can really do it more freely in the Netherlands.

W For me, I don't really feel like I have two identities. In the beginning, when I just left China and started to speak English, it felt like the me who speaks English is different from the me who speaks Chinese. But when I started growing up, they merged together. So I feel like a very complete me.

29. And do you view yourselves more as Chinese than as Asian?

W It depends on the surrounding area. If I'm together with Asian people in a white dominant group, I will definitely feel more like an Asian person. Over the past few years, you can definitely see the rise of Asian culture. Asian clothing, Asian style makeup. It's become such a trend. But if I mingle with other Asian people, or even Chinese people, I will feel more like a Chinese person.

B For me, it's the same. In an international setting, I will feel more Asian, also because we have to be more united. In non-Asian countries, we have to be an Asian community that helps one another out. But in smaller groups with Asian people, I am more Chinese.

W I remember having this conversation with one of my Asian friends, and we said it's so much easier to connect with Asian people, even though we speak English.

B There are also a lot of people here that think that any person who looks Asian is Chinese. But those people come from their own countries, have their own culture and identity.

Yeah, a lot of Dutch people are very ignorant when it comes to Asian culture.

W I think it's also about the fact if they want to know about it. I have a very good Dutch friend. Her boyfriend is Korean. It was very easy for me to connect with her. She really understood certain things I do and say, by building a foundation with her boyfriend and his family. She has this general interest in Asian culture. But for some Dutch people, who are into certain types of news about China, they always come to me for information about, for example this Chinese credit system. I had never heard about this system. It's something you hear about here, on the streets, but is not a real thing in China. But even in Leiden, university lecturers talk about this system. So I feel like this whole misinformation makes it difficult to start a non-biased conversation.

B I think another reason is because China blocked off the whole internet. They built an internet wall. So the information is quite different inside and outside the wall. This is why people have different perceptions of Chinese people. The Chinese government wants to keep the society very stable, so they want to block off the entire internet. But this has a very serious side effect. People can still get access to this information through VPN. So they can see different information, and they'll know one of them is lying, because the information is different. That can be a bad thing.

30. Has your stay in the Netherlands, outside the wall, changed your view of China?

B Yeah. It changed my image of the government, because you know they made a lot of mistakes, but in China, they don't admit it, and nobody dares to talk about it. So you never know. But here, you do know those things happened, so you will have a more objective perspective.

W Yeah, I think that's really the key. You start to really compare what's the mainstream voice in China, and outside. For a very long time, I stopped believing any sort of news. Because you don't know. I feel like we really live in this post-truth era, where you don't really know what is real, and

what is fake. Especially my major has really taught me how to look at one thing from a model perspective. So I think that's not really an effect of living in the Netherlands, but more my major.

31. Was there any influence on your personal morals and values, because of your stay here?

B My value has actually changed. Back in China, I was a social activist. There were some protests. I wanted to join. However, they had very bad outcomes. The person who started this protest disappeared. She was a student of our top university. She just disappeared, and nobody cared about it. There was no media that announced it to the public. Some did, but the next day, all articles were gone. When that happened, I changed my mind and realized I couldn't change this world, I couldn't have any impact. I should just take care of myself, and that's it. But when I came here, I felt that I could do something. I can do a lot of things. Like people who are the victims of racism, and then we protest against it. So you could say my value has changed. Or, I found myself again, to be an activist.

W For me, it's more about dating culture. Back in China, the dating culture is not so healthy, because it's developing so fast. People are very materialistic. They really look at how much money you've got first, before talking about love. But after getting into the Netherlands, I got kind of influenced by the dating culture here. I feel that's one of the main differences. Same for him. I definitely feel there are more, but at this point I can't think of any.

32. At this point, after your time here, what's your view of the Netherlands?

W I think one thing I really like about the Netherlands is that people really value their work life balance. Work is work, and life is life. Another thing is that they value talent as well. I think that is one of the reasons why the Netherlands has so many successful international companies. This creates benefits for us as well, because of the healthy labor market here.

B For me, the best part is inclusion. Yeah, also the management of creativity. Here, a lot of companies and the whole society encourage people to come up with their own thoughts, to be creative and make innovations. That's what I found here. During my studies, I also did a lot of key studies regarding Dutch enterprises. They all manage creativity really well, compared to Chinese companies. That's really suitable for me, because I want to do some creative and innovative jobs.

W I also feel the Netherlands really values art. That's something I really enjoy, and that's something I only developed after coming to the Netherlands. Before, I would never label myself as an art person. But since I came here, I really enjoy going to the museum and discussing this topic with friends. During my return to China during COVID, I realized even very close friends of mine, who share similar life values and share a similar mindset, really talked a lot about luxury brands and material stuff. I remember I was writing on my WeChat, saying I really miss those conversations I had in cafes in the Netherlands. Just talking about love, talking about life and spiritual stuff, or art. They care about nature as well.

B Dutch people care about the world, as well. In China, we mostly care about ourselves, our society, because we have our own problems. But here, people care about other people, for example Ukraine.

W I think that's also about the access to information.

33. Did your view of the Netherlands get influenced by the pandemic?

W A bit, I would say.

B Also, some problems occurred in the labor market. For now, I know that in the hospitality industry, a lot of people are moving to another position. For example, a lot of people are now doing COVID support. Because that makes more money than working in the hospitality industry. This has impacted Dutch society a lot. Because before, people could just do whatever they liked. Be a barista, or do something else.

W For me, it's more like that before, we had a really strong faith in the Dutch government and in how they would handle a crisis situation like this. But after the pandemic, I do feel they are not as capable as I imagined, in terms of handling a crisis. I think the biggest example for that is that in the first six months of the pandemic, the way they handled it and made announcements, the way they forced people to wear masks; I feel they could have done a lot more.

B They were also so late. Neighboring countries, Germany, Belgium, France. They did it first, and then the Netherlands followed.

W I remember in summertime 2020, they were still arguing if masks are effective or not, while other countries were already doing it. I also think Dutch people are not as tolerant or inclusive as I thought, especially because of the anti-Asian racism. Because online, on a YouTube video, there were a lot of Dutch comments saying there is no racism in the Netherlands towards Asian people. Those people are just getting brainwashed by the American people. I saw this one comment that got a lot of likes. It said "I grew up in the Netherlands, I never experienced any racism, I got a very good job, I live a very happy life". And a lot of people responded to that, and they were all agreeing with it. But I feel like a lot of Dutch people are ignoring or refusing the fact that there is a lot of racism here. Of course, these comments do not cover everyone's thoughts. But it definitely reflects a certain group of Dutch people.

B I also found another interesting fact. Because of COVID-19, I got to do some part-time jobs. I discovered that all the heavy jobs, no Dutch people are doing that. Only immigrants are doing those jobs where you're lifting heavy things. Especially after COVID-19.

34. What do you think are the most important differences between the Netherlands and China?

W First of all, the political institutions are very different. So that already determines a lot of differences between those countries. As for culture and values, I think what we talked about before displays this very well. Community thinking versus taking care of yourself. Also, the feeling of always comparing yourself with other people in China. Yeah, because this political economic region in China called GDA is something that's saying that China is very politically centralized, but economically divergent. Every province is competing with other provinces, in terms of economic prominence, society stability etc. So we grew up in this society where you constantly compare yourself with others. One class compared with another, one grade compared with another, to motivate people. So I feel like comparing such a thing in China, and after coming to the Netherlands, I realized they also do it here, but not as much as in China. It has created a lot of mental issues for young people, because they would never really feel satisfied with themselves.

B Also, we can talk about privacy. That's the main difference I can feel myself. In China, I don't think everyone has their privacy protected very well. You don't have privacy. The government can search your information any time they want, there are cameras everywhere. But here, privacy is the most important thing to every individual. There's not a lot of cameras, even in stores. That's a main difference. As for culture, in China we all stay modest. We don't praise or applaud ourselves that much. We stay humble. But here, you can express yourself in multiple ways. This is another difference.

35. Do you also feel your Chinese identity influences the way you look at the Netherlands?

W Yeah, because we grew up in China, that definitely has an influence on how we look at things, not just the Netherlands. You can also notice sometimes, when the Dutch government stopped the lockdown and started letting everything get back to normal, some people on WeChat complained about it, thinking they were being very irresponsible to re-open the stores and everything. I feel like we are not really in that stage, more like in the middle.

B Language is also a factor here. We speak Chinese, so we think about everything in Chinese logic. So when we try to understand Dutch culture, we think about it in Chinese logic. But if we speak English, it's a completely different logic. So when we look at different things, we have different views.

36. What is the most interesting conversation you've had with a Dutch person?

W I once encountered this Dutch guy who spoke really good Chinese, and also lived in China for one year. He told me he felt that, for him, China felt very similar to the US. Big streets, lots of people. This is the first time I considered this. The fact that he spoke Chinese also brought a lot of mutual perspectives into the conversation.

B I had a conversation with a Dutch guy. We talked about the situation in Xinjiang. You can't talk about this topic with Chinese people. It was great to talk about that. I know about Xinjiang, I've been there a couple of times, my brother lives in the capital. But a lot of Chinese people don't even know about one of our provinces. They are misled by misinformation. But you can't persuade them, even though I told them I had been there many times. But they still don't believe what you tell them.

W This conversation also happened with a friend of mine, who I believe to be very open-minded, even though she's very determined in this kind of issue. She only believes the information she hears from the government.

B I also talked about this topic with guys from other countries, not just the Netherlands.

37. Would you recommend the Netherlands to your friends back home as a choice for studying abroad?

B Definitely, I already am! Only if you want to study hard, otherwise you should go to the UK.

W Yes. I also feel the education system here filters out a lot of people. I think the certificate you get from a good Dutch university is really impressive.

B Only thing is that the prices for housing here are so high.

Tenth interview: Yennifer

1. When did you first come to the Netherlands?

August 2020.

So right before the first COVID peak?

Maybe. I'm not very familiar with the peak timeline.

Yeah, it was around September when the numbers first really started to go up. You did not notice anything about that?

I don't know. I'm not very conscious about the numbers and the news.

You weren't worried about going abroad during that time?

Not that much. I mean, I was a bit worried, but not that much. To some extent, of course, I had to go abroad, to further my education. I was supposed to go. People were even going abroad during WW2. So this is nothing compared to that.

Where in China are you from?

Xi' An.

What do you study?

Master's philosophy.

How long will you be staying for?

I will graduate this semester. But I have no idea what I will do after, where I'm gonna go.

Are you enjoying your stay here, up to this point?

Yeah, I think so. Since the timeline, everything is finally going back to normal and I can start my student life. I'm finally having fun here.

2. Why did you choose the Netherlands for going abroad?

There are a couple of reasons. In terms of finances, I did not choose the US and UK because they are so expensive. I like to go to a European country, because that is where philosophy originated. So Oceania is excluded, and I wanted to start in an English program. In Leiden, the English program is very good.

Do you speak any Dutch?

No, just dankjewel and alsjeblieft. I don't see the point in putting all the time and effort into learning it, since the Netherlands is the only country where they speak Dutch.

3. Did you know anything about the Netherlands, as a country and culture?

To some extent. This is the first country that allows gay groups to get married, I kind of like that. The whole atmosphere of tolerance, I like that. Also the legality of drug use is a sign of tolerance.

Did you have any expectations regarding what your life was going to be like, before coming here?

Not much, actually. This is my first experience studying abroad, so I don't know what to expect. Also, this is my first time living on my own. Before, I only lived with my housemates in a dormitory, and before that with my mom, so this is my first time living by myself. I had some expectations about that, but nothing related to the bigger environment.

This is also your first time going abroad?

For the long-term, yes. Not for travel purposes.

When you first came here, were you very surprised by the Netherlands? Did you experience a culture shock?

According to my memory, no, but I experienced a lot of obstacles during my daily life, like how to take a train and how to do grocery shopping. I mean, I don't read Dutch so I'm completely ignorant to shopping, but I still have to get what I want. Another thing is, China specifically does not have a very good international reputation. So I have to deal with reputation related to my national identity instead of myself, so I have to answer a lot of questions related to China. It's tiring to some extent, but also very interesting and fun. I can finally see how other people see China, instead of what all the Chinese propaganda tells me. Loads of people hold so many stereotypical views of China, instead of having actual knowledge. It's not just Dutch people who have these stereotypical views, just people not living in China. Internationals. For example, they think Chinese people eat everything. Or things related to politics, I was asked to comment on this, but I don't really want to. I don't have an opinion on that.

4. What's your social network like here?

First of all, I had some friends back home, so I kept in touch with them through the internet and social media, like WeChat. Here, I used to be in a DUWO dormitory, so I had a couple of housemates there. We had a lot of fun. International people really like to reach out. They are also alone and lonely, I still keep in touch with them. Some of them still live in Leiden, even though their housing contract has ended. Apart from them, I take part in a couple of student associations. We have some parties or specific events. I meet people, hang out there, but this friendship is always short-term. Only when we meet up, but not for a longer period. I'm a member of ACSSNL, Leiden United last semester, and this semester an Erasmus association. Also Symposium, a student association founded by philosophy

students. I also took part in lacrosse sports for fun. Also, I'm currently a volunteer for the Humanities department, on a diversity project founded by students.

Are most of your contacts Chinese, or internationals, or Dutch?

Most of my contacts are internationals and Chinese. Like, half half? People I meet in person are all internationals. People I meet online are Chinese friends from my friends. I don't really meet any Dutch people, because they already have their closed circles. They don't really reach out for new friends.

Would you like to make more Dutch friends?

I'd like to, yes, but I don't want to force them to. They are occupied, and it's not very nice. Most of the Dutch people I do encounter are in my classes. But at the moment, I don't have a lot of physical classes. We also only talk about study related subjects, we never talk about private stuff. ACSSNL does organize events that also include Dutch people, but I have never taken part in them. I was mostly occupied already during those time slots, or the events already had too many participants.

5. Did you feel very anxious when there was a first lockdown in December 2020?

I never felt I needed to go home. I also didn't really experience loneliness at that time, because I was living in a nice dormitory at that time and we had a lot of parties. For myself, I did feel anxious and panicked, but that was more related to my studies, not because of my social life. I was, to some extent, maybe a bit worried about getting COVID. But after I got vaccinated, I did not worry about this anymore. I did avoid busy social events a bit before then.

6. How do you feel the Dutch government handled the pandemic? Were you aware of their policy?

According to my experience, I have no extreme feelings about that. The numbers are going up, yes, but in my social circle only 2 people had COVID. So I did not feel it affected my own health very much. I actually kind of appreciated that the policy was that everything went back to normal, rather than staying in lockdown, because I really want to lead a normal life.

Was your life influenced a lot back in China?

To some extent. When it was the first half of 2020, when COVID started, I was not affected a lot. Not because the policy was not harsh, but because I basically just lived at home and had my own fun. I didn't really have a social life at home, back then. As for my friends and family, their lives are still deeply affected, even though it is already 2022, two years since the start of COVID. I really appreciate my normal life here.

7. How do the regulations here differ from those back in China?

A lot. As an individual, there's no technique to supervise me, whether I have COVID or not, whether or not I am in quarantine. I mean, it's not that I will go out. But I am in full control of myself, I am responsible for myself, rather than monitored by other people. Also, here, at least, you do not need to have negative test results every two days, even though you are already vaccinated. Even if you don't want to travel, you just want to live a normal life. It's kind of insane now in China.

You don't feel the regulations here were too strict?

Well, compared to what I have experienced in China, it does not feel strict to me.

Does it feel too loose?

To some extent, yes. But I am not an expert in policies and regulations.

But you can still have your personal opinion, right?

Did you know there is a protest that goes against the universities trying to install some cameras? So that they can detect in university buildings how many people have been in a classroom? Given this

information, I guess maybe the regulations are kind of okay? I don't know, otherwise there might be more protests, given how much people here do not really enjoy the regulations from the government.

So you think Dutch people are really standing up to the regulations? Are they protesting too much?

I don't know. Maybe they have the feeling that they need to protest this much. I won't say "too much". But it's more than I would want to complain.

8. Did you at all times understand and follow the regulations?

Not really, I suppose, given the parties I threw. Apart from that, I tried to keep 1.5 meters distance and wear my masks at all times. But that's not a lot.

And did you at all times understand the regulations? Because it seems the Dutch government changed their mind a lot.

Yeah, but they have a website where you can follow it.

9. How did you acquire the information regarding regulations?

I did indeed check the government website myself, from time to time. We also had, from some student association, someone who translated what we had to do next and posted it in the WhatsApp group. That's where I got most information.

10. Do you feel the government themselves could improve the way in which they communicate the information to foreign exchange students?

Interesting. I don't think the government can improve this, but I think the university can improve this. They have all the e-mail addresses of the students, so they can send out the new policies to follow to all students. They don't do enough, they can do better.

11. Did the lockdown and social distancing cause you to grow more attached to Chinese friends, did you have more contact with people back home?

I personally do not think so. I don't really need a lot of social contact. The social contact I receive here is quite enough for me already, even though it's COVID time. But did that increase the possibility of me reaching out to Chinese friends more? I don't think so. The fact that I lived in a dormitory also helped with this. So we physically communicate everyday. We were not fully isolated in our rooms. I had almost 20 housemates, and 10 of those I saw regularly. I also know some Chinese people in my building, but they choose to live in a studio and avoid contact with others. I think they do this because of fear of COVID. More so than me, for example. I don't think that all Chinese people are terrified of COVID. I just know that some people, mostly PhD students, they kind of do not try to live a very rich and full social life, due to their fear of COVID.

12. You also mentioned that one of your biggest struggles was that everything is in Dutch. What are some of the challenges you encounter in your current daily life?

Right now, it's my thesis. I hate it. I'm halfway through, but it's so much work. Other than that, a lot of things are so expensive for me. Maybe still the social part as well. During parties, you meet people. But they're just acquaintances. That's a similar issue with dating and Tinder. You basically talk about the same stuff all the time. People always ask me the same questions, related to my background. It's also quite hard to maintain a friendship with the people you meet at parties. I have no longstanding Dutch friends.

13. Overall, do you feel Dutch people are open minded and easy to connect with?

It's hard to answer, because I don't meet enough Dutch people to make such comments. But, I think Dutch people who reach out to have friends and meet internationals are already open minded. I personally did not meet every Dutch person. I only met two or three. So I really can't make that comment.

14. And how do you feel Dutch people respond to the lockdown and regulations, whenever you're in the street or supermarkets?

I can tell a lot of people don't agree with the regulations. Right now, people are still supposed to wear face masks on the train. But a lot of Dutch people are not doing that anymore. So I can tell a lot of them are unhappy with the policies.

Were you surprised by any other behaviors of Dutch people over the past few years?

Not really. Whatever I saw, I have come to expect. Even though it's forbidden to do fireworks in Leiden, everyone is still doing it during New Year's. People just violate the law.

I would say people are much more obedient in China?

Yeah, because people would get in trouble and receive punishment in China. But not over here.

Do you think that's okay? People violating the law and not getting into trouble?

From the perspective of the law, it's not okay, because that's disrespectful. But personally, I don't really care about it. I am not an enforcer of the law. Do whatever you want.

15. Was there any specific COVID regulation here that really surprised you, or that you did not understand or saw the point of?

According to my memory, not much. I cannot really recall any. A lot of policies were not really useful, because they require full cooperation, but people here do not want to cooperate with the government. For example, there is an app that lets you know when you pass people who have COVID. It's a nice try, but people who walk on the street are not the people who report things to the app. But I don't think this is because of the app or regulation, but because of the unwillingness of people to cooperate. I'm not trying to blame Dutch people here. I just want to declare that, as a policy maker, you should know how people respond to your policy. You should take that into account before you put a policy into practice. Good try, though. Besides that, I really did not understand the curfew. You forbid people to go out after 8. It's not like people come out much after 8 anyway, they are usually at home. But you still enforce curfew, and it has a very high punishment if you go out. This I really did not understand.

16. Did you have COVID yourself?

To my knowledge, no. I took self tests, as long as I found I had symptoms. I was never tested positive.

17. Did the pandemic influence your study performance?

To some extent, yes. The limited seats in the library was a big hindrance. There were a lot of times when I could not book a seat, while I really needed to go to the library to study. They only allow you to book one slot for four hours. I did not enjoy that policy. I personally also consider that physical classes are more productive for me. However, during my first semester here in autumn 2020, I was experiencing a language transition problem. At that time, I really appreciated the online class method. Online teaching is also less scary and overwhelming for me. Also, my classmates are mostly Dutch, so they always talk Dutch during breaks. I don't like that, it makes me feel excluded.

18. What about your mental health?

To some extent, yes, to some extent, no. The yes part comes from political depression. I mean, you can tell from the news that people everywhere are suffering. You can't ignore that fact. That really

made me feel depressed, because I can easily be in a similar situation, and feel depressed from what I am into now. That really made me sad. But also, to some extent not really, because suddenly everyone is experiencing the same issue, but I was experiencing this in China for all my life, so I can now relate to all those people. There are a lot of videos of people that try to teach you how to deal with that situation, and that helped me a lot.

19. Did you experience any stigmas or discrimination towards you as a Chinese student in the Netherlands during COVID?

I have to say, not really, but I also experienced that people on the street just walk around me in a big circle. I don't know why they do that, maybe they really try to follow the 1.5meter rule, or maybe they see my Asian face and just want to avoid me. But apart from that, generally no discrimination.

20. Do you feel that your Chinese identity influences your social position here?

Yes. First of all, Chinese people and China do not have a very good reputation here. So I kind of have to explain to people a lot of the same things related to the Chinese government. People from other countries don't have to answer these sorts of questions as much. But at the same time, it's not that serious. I do not have a similar cultural background as my international student peers. Whenever they ask me if I like something or not, I first have to ask them what that thing is, because I do not know. I do not share enough cultural background with them, like mass media pop culture. People in the West do share these things. So to some extent, I can hardly enjoy the conversations we have. It's not a serious problem, but it does bother me.

Do you feel your social position is different from that of other internationals?

Yes. A lot of internationals are Western, people from Israel, Germany, France, the US etc... they already share a very similar cultural background. I don't share that.

21. When you're here, do you consider yourself to be Chinese, Asian, international?

Firstly, I consider myself as an individual. As for identity, I consider myself to be an international.

How do you think other people experience and define you?

Let's say most people I encounter are very nice. They just ask me where I'm from. Very basic information exchange during a party. That's not a very difficult conversation. There's also a number of people who hear I'm from China, and they directly follow with a question about the Chinese government. Not that many, maybe two or three people. Also, I have one or two Japanese friends here. We kind of share similar experiences, because we're all Asian.

Do you feel Chinese students have a similar social position to other Asian students?

In terms of Asia-related problems, yes.

22. Do you also think Chinese identity is something that really exists?

That's very tricky. To some extent, yes, to some extent, no. So, in terms of the yes part: when we're talking about identity, it's me sharing similar reality issues with other Chinese students here. Can we consider that as identity? I don't know. I definitely feel closer to them, because we have similar issues and we use the same native language. So it's more convenient for me to use that. And we're from a similar cultural background. In terms of this part, yes. The no part comes from: besides the real, problematic issues, except for the language, as Chinese we do not live very similar lives. We have other, different problems that other people cannot relate to. Our problems are very different, we can't relate to each other. Identity is a difficult word. Maybe we have similar behavior patterns? But also, I personally think Chinese identity is an artificial word. It was invented to form a stable, Chinese society. As I'm already out of the physical Chinese society, so I don't really need this artificial identity. For example, if I'm asked about Chinese culture, I will talk about Chinese festivals and dumplings. But to some extent, it is something that is already presented in social media, on the

internet by the government. They tell me what Chinese culture is, and then I tell you exactly what they perceive to be Chinese culture. But culture is extremely diverse, especially among different regions, also identity. So to some extent, I do not think that Chinese identity itself exists, except for an artificial construct for the purpose of creating a stable society.

23. Do you identify with other Chinese people in your country?

So do I feel close to them due to belonging to the same category, “Chinese people”? I will be triggered if you mention the word “Chinese” in front of me. Definitely. Because, to some extent I know I have to be linked to this word, no matter whether I or other people consider me to belong to this category and concept. So in this sense, yes, but also I have been trying to detach myself from this big word. For example, I try not to get pissed off just when people say something about China and Chinese people. It’s actually none of my business. As long as it’s not towards me, I try to stay calm and be nice.

So, what I’m hearing is that in the big picture, you’re not trying to lean towards this artificial big concept too much?

Yes.

Do you find this easier or harder, now that you’re abroad?

To some extent, harder, to some extent, easier. For the harder part: back in China, everyone is Chinese. They do not consider you to be Chinese, they just consider you to be people, as per default. People tend to focus more on the differences we have. But here, because we’re already different in terms of nationality and cultural background, people focus more on the fact I am Chinese and they are not. So personally, I am more linked with this Chinese identity when I’m here. As for the easier part: when I’m here, I am not physically on the land of China, so it is easier for me to not care about the information or news or policies in China. I do not need to experience those things when I’m here.

Would you say that when you’re abroad in Europe as a Chinese student, with what you just said kept in mind, do you consider yourself to perhaps have two different identities?

Do you mean both as Chinese and international?

Yeah, because you’re both treated very much as a Chinese by the people you interact with, because they tend to focus on that. But at the same time, you feel you can be more detached from that because you’re here as just being yourself. So could you go so far as to say that you maybe have two identities here?

So I need to ask a couple of questions before I answer that. Do you say that identity is only related to nationality? Because we, as people, have multiple identities. Like, you can be Dutch, but you are also a child of your parents, and a boyfriend to your girlfriend. We all have different identities. So, do you specifically mean with regards to nationality related stuff?

In this case, yes.

So my second question would be: do you ask this to try and figure out if people like me, who have for a very long time only experienced themselves as having one identity, and now discover they have a second national identity? Or do you ask that it could also be the situation that a person has double citizenship and also has multiple identities?

Definitely not dual citizenships. I’m talking more about how you personally feel, and how you position yourself in this world. Do you consider yourself to really belong to China, and are here as a foreigner and Chinese person? Because you can also feel that you are here as an international person who is broadening her horizon and might travel further than just the Netherlands?

So from my own political view, I agree more with the second option. I’m not really a nationalist, more a cosmopolitan. Like I said, even when I was in China, I did not very much link myself with other Chinese and Chinese identity. I tried to detach myself from that. During that time, I was not viewed

by others as an international person. But I still tried to live a personal, individual life. I only play a role as an individual, not as a Chinese person.

24. How would you define the artificial concept of Chinese identity?

Personally, I consider this concept too abstract to use in a subtle context. If I'm gonna use the word "Chinese", I think I was intended to use that word in comparison to other national identities, like "Dutch" or "German". These kinds of identities are kind of more related to a government, because identity is formed, from the very beginning, by the government. One thing that is assured, is that behind these concepts, there is only one government. That's the only settled thing here. If we talk about cultural concepts, that would be way more diverse and complicated. The word "Chinese" in terms of culture is too big, abstract and massive to use.

I fully agree with you. But if you had to give a description of a typical Chinese person, what would it be?

If I had to, I would just use the stereotypical description of a Chinese person. To some extent, this is constructed, but it also does not exist as a very clear image. It differentiates from person to person. If you ask me about my own image of the stereotypical Chinese person, I don't think I am able to do that. I met too many Chinese people to be able to offer one generalization. Even within different regions, people are still very different from one another. I think, in comparison, you can say that people from one region are more similar to another. But you only mention this because you are comparing those regions to another. If you say that people from one region are this way, and people from another are that way, you are already offering your own generalization. In terms of a nice generalization, I also think the objectiveness is very questionable.

Do you think you could have answered all of my questions more coherently if we were speaking Chinese?

Maybe. Possibly. Do you think you could have asked the questions better if they were in Dutch?

I don't think so. I feel quite at home in English, sometimes even more so than Dutch. Every language has a different flavor to it. This also impacts the weight behind certain phrasings.

25. Did your stay here influence your view of China?

Definitely. First, in terms of government: because in China, a lot of political information is kept hidden from the people. I was really angry about that. I don't want to be fooled. I think I should have the ability to access all the information, and then make my own conclusions, and to know how to conduct and guide my own behavior. But here, after I got access to information and a lot of papers that people write in Hong Kong, and all the international rankings about what the comments on all countries are. Information of how other countries are actually doing. And after all the information I acquired, I actually became more gentle and understanding towards the Chinese government keeping that information secret. I don't think it is good that they're doing that, but I am now more understanding. Their behavior and policies seem more reasonable than before. I can be more calm when talking about that. But in this sense, I even more do not understand why they kept that information from people in China. Because if people receive more information, they can be more calm, knowledgeable and maybe won't hate the government so much. As for the second aspect: before I came here, the whole of how people conduct and life they live in the West was a mystery to me. Because of my experience here, this mystery finally unraveled itself. So I think it is good for me to know that everyone has their own issues. Not just me in my specific position, in a specific country. Everyone, in every position, even though they live in a rich country and have a good position, network, and health care; they still have their own issues. Due to my own experience, I can be more satisfied with what I have already received. Also, I learned a lot here, and I really appreciate that. So

maybe I can be more gentle and less critical towards what I experienced in China. Not just concerning the government, but also my parents, the whole society and community. An example: When I was still in China, I thought only Chinese people engaged in networking. People in high position and who hold high power will push their child to get into a better situation. They will use their power to let their children have adventurous experiences. But now I see that happens everywhere.

26. Your decision to study abroad, was that your own decision, or your parents’?

My own. I grew up in a very free environment, I was encouraged to do what I wanted to.

27. Has your time in the Netherlands also influenced your morals and values?

The first thing that pops up in my mind is that I have become a moral intuitionist. I cannot offer you a very comprehensive answer. No matter where I am, philosophy always pushes me to question your own assumptions towards the world, others, yourself, everything. So I already questioned a lot of moral views I had previously, back in China. Now that I’m here, it’s also one of the topics we discuss during classes. It has caused me to reconsider my own moral views. But that is basically what my own Dutch experience has allowed me to do. But moral views... I can only say that I learned a lot of skills and a lot of techniques in terms of how to communicate with other people, especially Western people. Because I’m immersing myself into this kind of environment, I adopt the skills to communicate with these kinds of people. But is that related to moral views? Morals are what you consider to be right and wrong. This kind of human interactive relationship... I know that I learned some techniques on how not to piss people off. This can be considered to be “right” in a certain context. I just think that I personally am more tolerable, whatever happens, because I learned that not everything which happens near me affects me. If people do something, that’s their own decision within their own right. It’s none of my business to care about that. It’s a hard principle. So I think I’m more tolerant, and I can be less judgmental towards people. I kind of have adopted this social technique.

28. What view do you have of the Netherlands?

Cute country, in terms of the landscape. I think, to some extent, the Netherlands is quite well known for its tolerance and internationally friendly environment, which I really appreciate. My view is that people here are happy, especially with the current social situation. They believe they are able to change a situation if they want to. This sort of democracy can be very ineffective. I mean, people have to put a lot of time and effort into discussing and debating, instead of putting things into practice and actions. But I do quite adore the whole environment where people can really protest and voice their opinions. On the one hand it’s not very effective. On the other hand, it’s not the whole picture. A lot of people still can’t voice themselves. For example, a lot of Russian students in the whole current war situation. They are experiencing a very difficult time, they are afraid of being discriminated against or sanctioned by the university. The environment of the Netherlands can be better, but it has already done a lot in terms of this situation. Also, as a non-European student, I pay a lot of tuition fees here. Do I feel discriminated against because of that? To some extent, yes, to some extent, no. I can understand how Europe wants to protect and prioritize European people. It’s understandable, but I also feel uncomfortable with that. Also, the political views here are different from those in China. People here have always been immersed into a diverse environment. They communicate with people from different backgrounds all the time, therefore the questions they focus on concern minorities and immigrants. These topics are completely different from those in China. There is a dominant government cultural ethnicity, which I consider to be very interesting. It also raises a lot of questions, because it’s so different. This kind of stuff is very different from what Chinese people generally consider to be important.

29. Do you think your entire view of the Netherlands was influenced by the pandemic?

To some extent, yes, I think. Because, especially during the pandemic, I can see that with how the government deals with this really troublesome situation, it indeed also requires the cooperation of the whole community. But that is the problem of a diverse environment. It is really hard to expect people from all communities to cooperate. So I can say the concept of only one government really pushing all these different communities to work together is really interesting to me. So that is how the pandemic influenced my view towards the Netherlands, I think. Also people's opinions on it. Like we said previously, there are a lot of protests. They voice themselves, but they still have to follow the rules. It's very interesting.

30. What's your view of Dutch people?

Diverse. According to my knowledge, which is not much, I have a couple of points I find very interesting. First of all, I have one Dutch friend who's colored. She is black, I think. I'm not very sure. I noticed there are a lot of colored people in the Netherlands, while I previously considered the Netherlands to be white dominant. So she told me that she considers herself to be Dutch, because she grew up here. But there can be people who come from multiple backgrounds, they can consider themselves to be half bloods. This is quite interesting for me. This is the first time I have experienced people who have multiple identities. So it's very interesting for me, I was very curious how they deal with their identities and how they consider themselves. Do they find themselves confused, lost, or does it bring any problems with it? Or does that lead to the fact that a cosmopolitan world is possible? Are multiple identities possible? If it's possible for one person, it might be possible for many people. That's the first interesting point. The second one is how people are tolerant towards sex workers, marijuana, gay marriage. It is very interesting how the Netherlands has a lot of rural areas where people hold very conservative views, but at the same time a lot of tolerant policies are conducted in the Netherlands that relate to sex workers and marijuana. They even have labor unions for sex workers. That is really nice. How these policies can be conducted successfully in spite of all those conservative notions is very interesting. The Netherlands is quite similar to Germany in terms of culture, language, and geography. But Germany, according to my knowledge, is not as open as the Netherlands. I feel that is quite interesting.

31. Are there any noteworthy differences between the Netherlands and China that we haven't discussed yet? Mainly on a political level and cultural values.

There's one thing I want to elaborate on. In the Netherlands, in such a small country, people tolerate each other and encourage diversity. They tolerate each other's disagreements. But in China, there is too much diversity, so the government tries to create a conception of unity. So people can agree on big things. Diversity cannot be encouraged, because there is already too much diversity. To some extent. In terms of the current political situation, if we consider ideology, diversity is one basic value of liberalism. But in China, liberalism is not very adored. So that is why I don't know whether it is the result or cause of the current situation, the ideology that China has adopted. But it's kind of fun to think about.

32. What is the most interesting conversation you've had with a Dutch person?

This one? I have not had a lot of opportunities to discuss these things. With my Dutch friend, I just complain about daily life. Shops closing early or not open at all. We don't consider all of the deep stuff we talk about.

Eleventh interview: Jolene

1. How long have you been here?

Three months and one year. In the middle of the lockdown period, last year. It was a little difficult for me to buy daily necessities, because the stores were closed at that time. I arrived here in Januari last year.

Was it difficult to come here from China?

No, but I do think it would be difficult to go back to China, because of the high ticket prices and quarantine for one month. Very time consuming, and just the thought of quarantine makes me crazy.

Where in China are you from?

Hebei province.

What do you study?

PhD candidate, a project about neurolinguistics. But I'm still designing my project, so I can't conduct any experiments yet.

2. Why did you choose the Netherlands as your country of exchange?

I got a scholarship from a specific institute, and I had to select a specific university because of that. For linguistics, Leiden University is one of the top universities in the world. The Leiden and China scholarship councils also have a really good relationship. A lot of people can get the scholarship if they select Leiden University. Another reason is that the Netherlands is one of the countries with the highest English speaking rate.

Can you speak Dutch?

No, but I'm taking classes. I don't think it's too hard to learn, because I am also learning English. I have also learnt other new languages, like French and Russian. But because I have a lot of other research to do, and a part-time job or social stuff, I don't have a lot of time to do more for learning Dutch.

3. Did you know anything else about the Netherlands before coming here?

Yeah, Amsterdam and the whores. A lot of my friends really want to visit Amsterdam for the whores and Red Light District. Maybe whore is not a proper way to call them. In Chinese, it's called hongdengqu, because the lighting is different from other areas. Also tulips, they're famous, right? And milk and cheese, dairy products that are very healthy. A lot of other Chinese people in China prefer to have milk from the Netherlands, especially for young babies. Also, I know that there are a lot of quite good universities here. Amsterdam University, Leiden, Delft, I know several of these universities are very famous all across the world.

4. When you came here, was the Netherlands very different from what you expected?

I have to tell you that I really had no expectations when coming here. Maybe it's my personality, not to have expectations beforehand. One thing that I have never seen before is that the weather here is so bad. So rainy, windy and cold. Very uncomfortable. I hate the weather here. I think a lot of people hate the weather here. I think the best period is from April to September. One half is good, and the other half of the year is really bad. Half a year of winter. Last winter, I was here. And this winter, I was here. Every winter made me want to go back. The winter in Hebei province is very cold. The four seasons are very clear cut. Spring is spring, lots of wind and warmth. Summer is very hot, with a lot of rain. Autumn is very cool. Winter is just cold and snowy. All the four seasons are very different from each other. But here, not at all.

Did you have trouble getting used to life here?

I think it took about half a year. There was a lockdown when I came here. It was so lonely. It was just me in my studio room, every day, I could not go out. I had no social connections. All of the courses were online. There was no way for me to meet new people. It was just me, by myself, all alone. But then, several months later, from April, the weather was getting better. I gradually started going out with my friends. I went to see the tulips, went biking, and did other activities. From April, things were getting better. In September, the new semester started. Classes were on campus again, so that was one way for me to get to know new people. At that moment, I felt my PhD had only just started. Before September, the whole 9 months were not good for me. I used those 9 months to get used to the Netherlands and accept the lifestyle here. It's much better now, because I have a lot of friends here. I gradually started to like living in the Netherlands, because I have found my own pace here. I hang out with friends, do my research, got a part time job, go to Chinese restaurants, and go shopping. It's very similar to my life back in China.

5. Do you mostly socialize with Chinese people, or internationals, or Dutch people?

Most of my friends are Chinese. I also have several Dutch contacts, but they are all from Chinastudies. We hang out together sometimes. I also have some other foreign friends in my office. They're from the UK, Chile, or other countries. They all do linguistics. Most of my friends are Chinese, like 90 percent. I think it's really hard for us to get to know some local friends. We're not bachelor or master students. We don't need to take courses. There's not a lot of opportunities to meet people or get to know each other. We just focus on our own research. I'm also one of the most social students in the building. Most of my friends are Chinese, and most of my other colleagues are also Chinese. I actually do want to get to know some local people. But it's not easy to get to know each other, and really make friends.

6. You didn't go back to China during the entirety of your stay here?

No. Maybe next year. Maybe the price will be lower then, than now. But now, it's so crazy expensive. Like, 5000 euros?

7. How do you feel the Dutch government has handled the pandemic?

I don't really know anything about that, or the Dutch policy. I only know some basic things, like when you could get your booster. But I'm not interested in it. I don't like policy news. I don't even like the Chinese news about this subject.

Did that ever lead to problems in your daily life? Because there are all these rules that you have to follow everywhere.

There were some problems. Like, when I want to go to a Chinese restaurant, I have to make an appointment. It's very inconvenient. Or when I went to Germany for travels. I did not have a booster. I could not eat inside restaurants, could only take away food and eat in the streets. Going there was no problem, but going back to the Netherlands was more difficult. But luckily, I can eat in the restaurants here now. I got two vaccinations in China, and I got two vaccinations in the Netherlands. That's why I did not want to get a booster, I already got so many shots.

8. Do you know about any differences between China and the Netherlands concerning the COVID situation?

In China, it's way stricter than in the Netherlands. People in Beijing are not allowed to go outside without their mask on. It's not easy for them to go out. But Beijing is the capital, so it's stricter than other places in China. But people are also required to wear masks everywhere, also inside. But in the Netherlands, you have a choice. You don't have to wear a mask if you don't want to.

Actually, in the Netherlands, masks were required indoors from the end of summer 2020.

Oh yeah, now that you mention it. But now, it's not required anymore, right? See, this is evidence that I am not aware of the policy. I still wear my mask everywhere, so I feel safer. The situation in China is getting out of control again, so now restrictions are much stricter than before. Several thousand people have corona there now. They are going through a tough time. Even if you don't like that kind of news, sometimes it just comes to you, like through WeChat. Almost all of my social connections are through WeChat.

9. You got all of your information through WeChat?

Yes, there are channels I subscribe to. This is one of the major ways for us to catch the news.

10. Do you think the government also has a responsibility to channel the information to you directly?

(ze heeft het hier niet over corona-gerelateerde zaken, maar over algemeen nieuws) It's actually quite difficult for me to catch updated news in the Netherlands. The only thing I can do is check the website, but it is so old-fashioned and inconvenient for me to check the website every day. So I just ignore more of the news, and that's why I don't know anything about local Dutch news. There is also no good way for us to get that information. Maybe they should have a WeChat channel for that, because I want to know more about local people and culture. That's also one of the reasons I want to learn Dutch. I don't want to have lived here for four years, and know nothing about the Netherlands. So I'd like to learn more about local people and local culture. But I don't think there are easy ways for me to get to know about that. I need to become friends with some local people, and then they will invite me to do some Dutch things. That is one of the ways.

Language barrier is a big thing. So maybe one of your best chances would be with people who study Chinese.

Definitely. That's why I have so many friends who are from Chinese studies. Some of them used to be my language buddies. But not anymore, because they were too busy. I can't believe that someone is so busy that they don't have one or two hours per week to be a language buddy. I think one of the biggest challenges is that you can't only have the purpose to learn a language from each other. You have to have a stronger connection than that, because otherwise you won't have any things to talk about. If you're very good friends, you can just have a good time together. If the purpose is only to learn language, you're not going to have a good time together. Maybe I need different language buddies. I had one language buddy that was actually one of my friends. We had plenty of things to share. But another language buddy, we used to meet up every week. But after two months, we found we did not have that many things to talk about.

So where do you work?

Acupuncture place. But I only do it for the money. I work one day in the week, the rest is for research and friends.

11. What are the most challenging things you encounter in your daily life?

My research. I still have a lot of work to do before I can conduct my experiment. My colleagues are already conducting their experiments, so I am running a bit behind. I also think one of the biggest difficulties for me is that I have to cook every day. This is very difficult. In China, I can buy a lot of stuff for a very small price. Also, there is a canteen on campus, with so much food for a low price. It's very convenient and delicious. But no, here we have to cook ourselves. It's not convenient, and also not delicious. I make typical Chinese food, and nice spicy food. Stir fry some things. Whatever I can get from the local supermarket. I also go to the Chinese supermarket, but it's a bit difficult. First, I get

my things from the local supermarket. When I grow tired of that, I go to the Chinese supermarket and spend a lot of money. I live in student housing.

12. Do you feel a strong wish to connect to Dutch people?

To be honest, I don't have a strong desire to connect to local Dutch people. I want it to happen naturally. I don't want to try very hard. I just want to meet different people in a normal and natural way. Koen is one of my neighbors, and that's how we met each other. Other people from my office, or the lab, we met each other in a quite natural way. We are quite happy when we are having conversations together. It's easy to be friends and have a connection. I don't need to or don't want to work really hard to connect with local people. Sometimes, there is a gap between different people from different countries. Especially between Western and Eastern people. I quite understand that maybe some Dutch people don't want to make friends with Asian people. Maybe they have their own opinions on Asian people, and it can be quite difficult for us to make good friends with them. I don't want to work really hard on it.

Why do you think Dutch people don't want to be friends with Asian people?

I don't think that they don't want to be friends. I think Dutch people are more friendly than people from other countries. I used to travel to Germany, and I think Germans are not that friendly. Sometimes, they're rude. The Netherlands is really open and tolerant. That is why I like the Netherlands so much. They are very open, more open than people from other countries, I think. But I still think there is a gap between people from different cultures. I don't think I'm a racist. But I do think there are differences between people's minds. White people are a little bit superior to yellow people. Also, for us, some people have opinions that yellow people are a bit superior to black people. Sorry, I'm just very direct, and I'm telling you what I'm thinking about. This is my real feeling and thoughts. I think Dutch people are really nice, much nicer than people from other countries.

Do you always talk about Chinese people as yellow people?

Yes, but only when I'm making the comparison between white, yellow and black. But not when I'm in Asia, like China, Japan or Korea. We are all the same, so I don't need to refer to us as yellow. It's only used when we want to make a comparison. Because I heard some stories from one of my friends. One of my friends, Xinyi, is doing her master's here. When she was doing an assignment, she was in a group with other white people. Maybe they were not Dutch. Some other European countries. We all refer to them as white people. She wanted to make friends with them, when doing the assignment. During the group assignment, they were very nice to her. Afterwards, she thought they were friends, but they weren't. It hurt her a lot. She thought they were friends because they worked together really well, did some nice things and were very nice to each other. But after the class, they only greet each other and nothing else. It hurt her a lot, and made her not want to make any more friends here. From my own experience, I think there are a lot of people who want to make friends with different people. But I don't think there's a huge difference between one group and another. I hope that opinion can change later, for me. I don't know. It's hard to say. My point is that it's difficult for us to make friends with local people.

So why do you refer to Dutch people as waiguoren?

Because we are Chinese, and when we are talking about Dutch people, they are not Chinese. To Chinese, you are always foreigners. But actually, we should be the foreigners, because we are living in the Netherlands.

Do you consider yourself to be the foreigner, or do you consider Dutch people to be the foreigners?

I don't think about this a lot. I just think that we are different, so we live our own life, and stick to our own thoughts. We want to lead different lifestyles. It's okay that we're not friends, but we can all live

together in the Netherlands. That's one of the good things about the Netherlands, and that's why I love it here.

13. How do you feel Dutch people have responded to the lockdown and all the regulations they had to follow?

I think they like freedom. They are kind of crazy. Maybe from your point of view, we are the crazy ones, because we wear our face masks everywhere. But COVID has such a high transmission rate. It's easy for us to get COVID, and a lot of people around me are tested positive. So why are people not wearing their masks, and allowing themselves to get COVID? I cannot understand that. If you wear the mask, maybe you will stay negative, and other people will also stay negative. It makes COVID finish as soon as possible. If you do not wear masks, and do not obey the restrictions, it only makes the situation worse. I think it's kind of crazy. But not all Dutch people are like this, right? You think differently, Koen thinks differently, other people think differently. Only some Dutch people are protesting, or doing some violent and childish things. Who are they? But I think it's a lot better than the situation in China. China has such a large population. More than half of the whole Chinese population are being childish. They can do even worse than the people here. Only a small portion of Chinese are well educated. The whole population is really large, and only a small part is receiving a good education. Those other people are easily deceived, and are used and misled into doing bad things. Like, there's a lot of fake news. It's really hard for us to tell which is real and which is fake. Even the government can spread fake news, to make the people do something, and make their own power stronger. Every country does this, right? Some people are more easily controlled by the government and the parties. Like the independence of Taiwan. I think this is a really sensitive topic, and everyone has different opinions on this. People from the Mainland, like me, we all hope that Taiwan can come back. Because it used to be a part of China, so we really want it to come home. But for people living in Taiwan, maybe they don't think so. Especially the government in Taiwan, they really want to be independent. Like, there are some politicians who want Taiwan to be independent, but for their own sake. A lot of people will use some fake news to mislead people in China, to do some bad things to their country.

Besides people not wearing face masks in the Netherlands, are there any other behaviors in relation to COVID that surprised you?

They go out for parties. A lot of parties. One specific example, some friends from your department had a Halloween party. They invited me, and I'm afraid of corona. They were not wearing their masks or keeping their distance. I think this is very high risk, so I refused their invitation. At that time, I really wondered why people were having a party like this, and why so many people went there and even invited me. I don't understand why people do this, it's so very risky. I'm still very afraid of corona, but I also really want to hang out with my Dutch friends. I don't want to refuse their invitation.

But you got vaccinated, right?

Yeah, but you can still get positive.

I am not that scared of COVID, though, and my friends are not either.

So you consider it just as a normal flu? You trust you can get better? You trust your own body?

Definitely. I never get sick.

So that's the difference. Us Chinese people get really sick. We don't put a lot of effort into our own bodies.

I also know someone who only eats instant noodles, it's very unhealthy.

I'm not someone who eats instant noodles every day, I mostly cook fresh. But when I get home from work and am very tired, I do sometimes eat instant noodles. It's very tempting, but I really want to control myself.

Dutch people are not very afraid. They value living their own life more.

So most Dutch people think corona is over, and don't think it's that scary?

At the start, we were kind of scared. Back in March 2020, a lot of old people died. But after that, it cooled down a lot. Very quickly, people started getting vaccinated, and death rates were very low. The only thing is that at some point, the hospitals were very full. Did you know about that?

I heard something about that. When the pandemic first started in China, overseas countries did not worry. But then it also spread to Europe, and they got a peak. As for me, I am afraid of it. Even though the symptoms might not be that heavy, it will have some influence on your body. I believe that, because some of my Chinese friends who got tested positive, thought it was difficult to breathe during those two weeks. So I still believe corona will attack your lungs. Maybe it will last your whole life, we never know because it's a new disease, so I tend to be very careful.

I really believe in the strength of the immune system, your body naturally fighting back against diseases and getting stronger.

Aah, so the body gets stronger by fighting back. It makes sense. I never heard or thought about that. Maybe I should take off the mask, and make my body fight back against the virus. Thank you for your explanation. That really makes sense. I agree with you. Like, some babies are overprotected by their parents, and their body gets weak. But babies who are just out in the open are stronger. The natural process of the human body. I never thought about it before, and because I think this is a very dangerous virus, I want to stay away from it. Maybe I can die from it, so I don't want to take risks. I also don't know about any side effects, maybe I will have a serious problem for the rest of my life. So maybe you also don't want to get a booster, right? Maybe it's not useful. I will probably get a booster, because it's encouraged by the government. Maybe the people who have gotten corona and recovered are some of the strongest people in the world.

14. Which COVID regulations really surprised you? Regulations that you perhaps did not see the use of?

You mean that I thought were ridiculous? Hmm, let's first see what kinds of regulations we had. I heard at first, back in China, if you wore a face mask in the Netherlands during those first couple of months as a Chinese, you would get attacked or blamed on the street. Why is that? If you want to wear a face mask, that is your own choice and right. I think that's ridiculous. After the summer, they finally changed that, and face masks were required everywhere. Another restriction I think is ridiculous is not being allowed to go outside after 5 o'clock. I don't think it works.

Actually, at first, you were not allowed to go outside after 8pm, and after a month they closed the curfew to 9pm.

I remember there was one time when I had to be home before 5 or 6. But that only lasted for one or two weeks. Maybe I have it wrong. Another rule is that you could only have 3 or 4 people for a visit. But I think they should forbid it entirely. It's a little bit stupid, to allow people to bring corona to other houses. But it's okay. There are not a lot of restrictions here. In China, there are a lot of strong and powerful restrictions. You are not allowed to do a lot of things. Not allowed to go outside. If one person in one building is tested positive, then all the people in that building have to get tested. I don't think this is good, I don't agree with it. It's not very effective. I also think it should not last for a long time. People who have to stay inside are very poor. They cannot go outside, cannot get fresh air.

Do you, overall, agree with the Chinese way?

No, I think it's too much. Too extreme, too many restrictions. I feel very lucky to be in the Netherlands, because I have freedom. I can go everywhere, I can even go on vacation.

You also mentioned you're scared of corona. Don't you think the Netherlands is too loose?

No. I am actually getting quite used to the Dutch way. At first, corona was very dangerous. But now, it's getting better. Not as dangerous as before. We shouldn't overreact to it. At the start, corona was very dangerous, and the Chinese way was very good. The government was very powerful, and not too many people got infected. But you can't do that for two years, it's too long. You also have to think about people's mental health. You can't just work at home all the time, not be allowed to visit other people or go out for activities. This is not a normal life. One thing that's good, is that the Chinese government is very powerful. They did a lot to control the corona. The whole Chinese society is isolated from other parts of the world. So people in the society are kind of doing their own thing, they can go to work. Go shopping. Go do a lot of things similar to their normal life. Except in some special period, where they were not allowed to go outside. By that I mean one positive person, where everyone has to get tested. But besides that short period, they can live a normal life. So the whole isolated Chinese society keeps working, unlike the rest of the world. I think there's two ways of dealing with corona. Western countries just allow the whole society to get corona, and maybe the whole society is not going to work for half a year. But after everyone is tested positive, their immune system is good enough to fight back against corona, and then society can get back to normal.

But the Netherlands did not allow corona to spread. On the one hand, you have the very strict China. On the other, you just let corona and immune systems do their thing. But the Netherlands is...

In the middle? I think the Netherlands is doing good, it's in the middle. Only you Dutch people party a lot. But that is okay, you are strong enough. You are the tallest people in the world.

15. How has the lockdown influenced your study performance?

So when I first got here, all the research was postponed. Maybe I need a bit more of a push from my supervisor or colleagues. But because of the lockdown, I cannot get connected to them. I have to do everything by myself. I am quite lazy, so I don't think it went that well. For the first half year, I did not do a lot of research. I was focused on settling down here. After the summer, in September, we were allowed to go back to campus. At that time, I could do a couple of courses. At that time, I finally got back on track. I feel the influence was quite big. A lot of my friends went through the same thing.

16. What about your mental health?

It was so hard for me to make friends at that time. I only hung out with some of my neighbors, like for a walk or having dinner together. That was the only social activity I undertook. I only knew two or three at that time. My social life was not good. Luckily, I can make phone calls with my parents, despite the time difference.

17. Was there any discrimination towards you as a Chinese person during the pandemic?

I have one experience. When I was biking back from the library, and almost got back home, there was a very old man on the road who spit on me. Luckily, he didn't spit on my body, only on the bike. It made me feel terrible, because I'm so friendly. It's so rude. It hurt me a lot. This is not very severe. Some of my other friends are experiencing more severe problems. Some people have rocks thrown on their windows, and have bad words drawn on their wall. Those people all think that corona is from China, and blame Chinese people for it. They think Chinese people should go back to China. Luckily, my experience is not that extreme. Only some old people are not so nice and open. Most Dutch people are very nice. I am really afraid of kids though, because they make faces at me. Rude faces, which indicate that they don't like me because I'm Chinese. Also, because they're kids, they can sometimes do extreme things without getting blamed. I just stay away from them. Also, one of my friends who was taking the train had iron things thrown at her. She went to the police station to say something about it. I'm so glad other people like you and local people are very nice. There are many sweet

people here. So we do experience some discrimination. But now it's getting better, because corona is almost over. But maybe it's not because of China that we have corona. We do not know who brought the virus into the world, we do not know who to blame. One thing I think is really sweet is that I visited a museum in Amsterdam. It talked about the coronavirus, but they did not blame China for this.

18. How do you feel your Chinese identity influences your social position in the Netherlands?

I have a lot of things to say on this. I'm so glad you have this interview, because now I can finally talk about my real feelings concerning this subject. Firstly, China is getting stronger than before. Not only economically, but also culturally. Just the whole status of China in the international community has become much stronger than before. It's a fact. It's a fact. China is much stronger than before. So I can see that a lot of Western people are more interested in Chinese people, and more people are willing to learn Chinese. I remember that, at one time, my friends and I were hanging out in the street on Leiden Liberation Day. We were appreciating the sunset on the bridge, and suddenly there came a man who wanted to take a photo with us. But decades ago, when Western people came to China, Chinese people wanted to take a photo with them. But now, the same thing is happening here. So I think Chinese has become stronger, and this makes me feel happier. With China behind us, we can live better here. I think that is true, because China is stronger, and we are treated much better than before by local people. That is one good thing. The other thing is that, like I mentioned before, there are still differences between people of different colors. So I think there is a stubborn opinion on the bottom line. I feel like I cannot really integrate into Dutch society. Because, I notice that people who integrate from China into the Netherlands, there is a small Chinese group who are very isolated from local society. Maybe that is because they immigrated into the Netherlands 20 years ago. They are an old generation of Chinese, and they are not that well educated. Their backgrounds are quite similar to each other, so it's not easy for them to integrate into local society. Maybe that's why they are isolated from the local society, kind of isolated from the people I met. That is what I get from the people I met. That may not be the whole story, but I'm just sharing my own opinion. So I think they are kind of isolated, and that's why I don't want to stay here after graduating. It's a different society, I cannot really integrate here. I'm not Dutch. I will always have an Asian face. They will think I am just a Chinese, Japanese or Korean person with an Asian face. They will not consider me to be a real Western person. So I don't want to stay here after graduating, after my PhD. I want to go back to my own community. Because people all have the same identity here, and there. But on one hand, China is getting better and stronger. More and more people are interested in Chinese culture and people. Also, I know that a lot of boys here want to date Asian girls. Maybe they think Asian girls are different. But Asian girls are more popular than Asian boys over here, that is a fact. All of these things indicate that people are more interested in China, Chinese culture and Chinese people. But, on the other hand they still have some stubborn opinions that come forth from Western movies, where for example there are some stupid Asian boys who only focus on their studies and have no social skills. So there are some stubborn opinions on Asian boys, and also on the Asian face. I think that is because the information local people get is selected by the media. I mean, it's not the true and whole information of China. If you see some documentary film or video on China, there are also some untrue facts about China. They are delivering unreal information about China. So I shouldn't blame local people for this. They are not unfriendly to China. Because it's not the local people's fault. The information they get is untrue, and does not deliver the whole picture of China. It's the only thing they can get, from the media or other videos. They didn't know the whole picture of China, so they have their own prejudice. So that's two sides of my answer.

Do you also feel Chinese people also have a different social status from other nationalities in the Netherlands?

Yeah, because all nationalities have their own style, right? Only because Chinese style is quite different from Western style. Some Spanish people, for example, might be quite enthusiastic. They are very energetic, have a lot of body movements and hand gestures. Dutch people, on the other hand, are not very talkative. That is the Dutch style. So even for European countries, they have a different style. But Asian countries are so different from European countries, right? Especially China, we have such a long history. Some things just come from some old generation. A social style that has been passed down through generations. We have our own style. We are shy, and not so talkative, and we like to get together to do some things. Even in class, you can see that Chinese students are not so talkative. If they have questions, they won't let the teacher or other classmates know. That's our own way. I don't think it's a bad way, because sometimes I think some Western social styles are good enough. Every community has its own advantages, so we should learn from each other. Even in class, some people ask some stupid questions. You can just find the answers yourself, why waste everyone's time? I think it's kind of stupid and superficial. One tiny example, no offense. As for hierarchy, Western people are at the top. Yellow people in the middle, and black people at the bottom.

Where do Italians and Spanish, for example, fit in?

I think it's very hard to fit them into the ranking. They're not so white, they're a bit brown, but still, they are Western people, so they're higher than Asians. But nowadays, Asian people are shifting a bit to the other side. So maybe the ranking will change over time, but for now it's still the same.

Do you think other Chinese exchange students also have the same difficulties making friends that you do?

Yes, a lot of them do. Maybe they feel the same way. Because I am one of the more social girls among the overseas Chinese community. But I think, in university, it's easier to make friends with local people than outside the university. Because in university, especially for people who know something about China, it's much easier for them to accept Asian culture. At first, they would like to know something about Chinese, China and Chinese culture. Maybe that's one of their reasons for choosing Chinastudies. At least it indicates that they don't hate China. So it's much easier for them to accept Asian culture. Also, people in the university are well educated. They are more open minded than people outside the university. They really accept and respect people from different countries with different ideas. So it's easier for us to make local friends in Leiden University. I don't know how easy it would be to make friends outside university. Also, it's important to know how you can meet different people. Like I said, as a PhD student, I am only doing my research at the office. What I know is that my office colleagues are very small in number. But I want to know people with different backgrounds. That's more interesting, because then you can learn from each other, share different things with each other and learn some different information. I want to know some people who are not my colleagues. I mentioned that I learn Dutch, but I do not have the motivation to make friends with my classmates there. It's really hard. I think language is a problem. Even though I speak English, I cannot use English to express my feelings really well. When I talk to people who cannot speak Chinese, I have to use the simplest sentence to express my complicated feelings. So that is not that interesting. Also, if I don't have such a strong motivation to make friends with them, maybe they won't want to make friends with me either. So we are just classmates, who don't share other activities together. We take courses together, but everyone is just an individual person who doesn't do things with others. I think to become friends, we need to do something together, get to know each other and learn what kind of person you are. We can have a good time together, know each other, be happy together, and be friends. So there are several requirements that need to be met before we can become friends. I don't want to work really hard on it. If I can have a friend, then that person will just be my friend. You shouldn't have to put any effort in it, because then it won't be very comfortable. You are

not supposed to have to work really hard on talking to everyone. I think people can tell that you're trying too hard, as well. Just let it happen naturally.

19. How would you define Chinese identity?

It has to meet the typical Chinese characteristics. Black hair. Asian face. Asian shape. I thought about this before. Some Chinese babies who are born in the Netherlands won't identify as Chinese. They call us nimen zhongguoren. They think they are Dutch, but they have an Asian face and Asian characteristics. So how can they integrate into the whole society? If I were that person, I would just accept my Chinese character. At least part of my blood is Chinese, and I will accept it. I also know some mixed blood people, part Dutch part Chinese. Some of those babies are really active and willing to learn Chinese. I heard about one friend of mine who wanted to go to Shanghai once corona is over, to go live there. She likes China a lot. In this case, she accepts the Chinese part of her identity. She can choose whether to stay here or go to China. She has two choices. But I don't think Chinese people who are born here, whose parents are both Chinese, and don't accept their Chinese identity; I don't think this is good. I think you can be Dutch, but can also accept that you're Chinese and your parents are Chinese. Even if you're influenced by the local Dutch lifestyle, you still have some Chinese characteristics. You prefer hot water, because the Chinese body is just the same. A lot of Chinese people prefer hot water. Maybe they also prefer some Chinese food. See? This shows that they are Chinese. At least they're partly Chinese. If a person can accept the fact that they're partly Chinese, I will respect them.

Are you proud to be Chinese?

People from every country are proud of their national background. I'm proud of being Chinese even though there are a lot of problems in Chinese society, and a lot of problems the Chinese people and government should do something about. But I still believe that being Chinese is great. China is where I was born and where I grew up, so I feel that I should do something for China, for Chinese society. I should go back to China and do something for my parents, at least. I don't want to do too much, because you can't do a lot of things in your life. So I just want to focus on doing small things.

Did you decide to go abroad yourself?

It was my own wish, my parents did not want me to go out. They thought it was a bad time for a girl to live alone in a different country and culture. It's too difficult, they don't want me to live a difficult life. They don't want me to go out, they wonder why I want to go through all those difficulties. I can just live an easy life in China if I don't go out. But I really want to see different parts of the world, see how those people live, and see if I can live in that way.

20. Are you more aware of the fact that you're Chinese, here in the Netherlands?

Yeah. Because, when I go out I realize that I love China so much. A lot of my friends say that studying abroad is one of the best ways to educate people on how to love their country. You are experiencing the differences abroad, so it makes you miss your motherland more.

21. And when you're here, do you feel more Chinese or Asian?

A lot of my friends are Chinese, so I just think I'm Chinese. But I didn't meet a lot of other Asian people, like from Japan or Korea. Also, if I met them, I don't think we would be friends. I don't think they're very friendly to us. Even though we watch a lot of movies or listen to songs from Korea or Japan, when we're going abroad local people are more friendly to us than Japanese or Korean people. We don't like it when local people treat us as Japanese, like I hate it when someone says Arigato to me. There was also one time, when I was walking in the street, and an old man asked me if I was Vietnamese. I was not happy then, because I am Chinese! Can't he tell the difference between Chinese and Vietnamese?

Can you tell the difference?

Sometimes it's really hard to see. I can only be sure by language. They look really similar to Chinese people. Maybe you learned the history that long ago they were all part of China. We share some cultural things, and also some food. Japan is also from the Asian time of China. That's why their appearance is very similar to Chinese. Even for us, it's not easy to tell, even when we're going abroad. But it's really easy for us to tell when someone is from South East Asia, because they look very different.

22. Did your stay here change the way you look at China?

I think I have some changed thoughts about China. First of all, before I came to the Netherlands, I felt China was getting stronger than before. It would only take China several countries to catch up to the developed countries. But after coming here, to a developed country, I feel China still has a long way to go. China has a large amount of GDP. Economically, it's very strong. They have a large population, right? The whole GDP is divided by the entirety of the Chinese population, and it's comparable to people living in developed countries. But overall, it's large enough. It ranks as the second largest country, GDP-wise, in the whole world. But everyone is still a small amount. China still has a long way to go, if it wants to become one of the strongest countries in the world. Not just economically, but also politically, culturally, and in terms of education. This is one thing. Another is that I do have a lot of different opinions on Chinese politics now. When we were in China, we were blocked by the Chinese government, and we could not receive some messages, like real and updated information from the outside. We were very isolated and blocked from the outside. Also, I don't agree with a lot of policies from the Chinese government. They're not very humanitarian. Take corona, for example. People have to stay at home, no matter what they want. Sometimes, people are safe or suffering from other things. But if there is a positive case in one environment, it will affect everyone. it's not very humanitarian. Another aspect is that it is very sensitive for us to share certain information on the internet. Certain words or sentences on WeChat will be automatically deleted. Overall, in the whole of China, a lot of people really tend to protect themselves by not talking about those things, and not sharing their own feelings. When you speak some sensitive words, someone will make it public or send recordings or screenshots to the party, government or some organization, and you will get punished. I don't think the social culture in China is not very free. If I go back to China, I have to keep in mind that I have to be careful what I say. I would never talk about this subject in China. Even to my parents. When I video call with my parents, we don't talk about sensitive subjects, because it might be monitored. I did not have these views that much before I came to the Netherlands, because I did not realize it that much. After coming here, I can compare the two surroundings and social societies, and be aware of the questions. These are things I have kept thinking about a lot during the past year, and also talked with some of my Chinese friends about. You are the first foreigner that I share this with.

23. Did your stay here also change some of your morals and values?

I think the thing that changed the most is that I like freedom much more than before. Here there is more freedom than in China, especially when I want to express my own opinion. I cherish freedom a lot, I can do whatever I want, refuse whatever I don't want. I realize that, if I go back to China, I won't have such freedom. So I really cherish my freedom here. Another thing is that I have a lot of gay and lesbian friends here. That's the first time to ever have any LGBT friends, and also to know something about it. I am straight myself, but I can accept them much better than before. It's hard to imagine for me that there are so many LGBT people here. A lot of my Chinese colleagues are all LGBT. So maybe the Netherlands is very tolerant about this, and all those things are completely legal. So maybe that's why some people would choose the Netherlands as their place to live, and that's why

I encounter so many of them. As for the moral level, because most of my friends are Chinese, so we share the same cultural background, so it's hard for us to get exposure to new ideas. I would like to have some local Dutch friends, and maybe their opinions will influence me. But I don't have anyone to share those thoughts with, so I have not been influenced a lot. Except for the immune system thing you told me, and I shared it with my friends. They all agreed with you. But that's the only one. This is my second year, maybe in the next couple of years I will make more local friends, and change much more than now after exchanging ideas. I will stay here for at least 5 years, because the PhD takes a lot of time. It's very exhausting and depressing.

24. What is your view of the Netherlands?

It's a huge topic. As I mentioned before, it's very free. A free country. I think people here are nice, because I went on vacation in Italy. Although I really liked the weather there, and the food, and some other good stuff. But if I had to move to Europe, I would choose to live in the Netherlands. I think it's very good for living, studying and spending time here. Other countries, like Italy or Germany, are better for just short visits. But I did not like people in Germany. I like the Netherlands and Dutch people the most. They are very controlled, and very educated. They have their own values and principles, and know how to deal with things. They're not just educated by schools, but also by parents and themselves. The whole Netherlands is also very friendly, and very friendly towards foreigners. It's very easy to live here, and people can speak English very well. It was not easy in Italy. I also heard that the English of Spanish or French people is not that good. I love everything a lot, except for the weather.

What about Dutch culture?

I have no experience with that. I am still a foreigner here, so I didn't get into local society a lot. From a foreigner's point of view, I don't know a lot.

And how are you confident about your view of Dutch people if you did not meet a lot of Dutch people?

I only met a couple, and they were all very nice. But maybe that's not the whole picture. I consider that to be the whole picture, maybe. People in different countries have their own features. Dutch people are different from Italian or German people.

Was your view of the Netherlands influenced by COVID?

Only in the sense that I saw that Dutch people maybe love freedom too much. They love their own freedom more than other people in other countries. In China, they might think it is dangerous and not right for their life. They will obey the rules and abandon their freedom. But Dutch people, they just love freedom, and do not obey those restrictions, they have their own ideas and opinions. It's hard to control.

Were there any other experiences that influenced your view of the Netherlands?

No. My life is just study, eat, sleep, hang out with my friends. Once per semester we go on vacation. Maybe it's not necessary for us to have a lot of contact with Dutch people, maybe we can just live our own lives.

Do you and your friends ever talk about the Netherlands?

No, we just talk about our own lives. Maybe that's also because we're PhD students. We don't have as many activities and social opportunities as bachelor or master students. We just focus on our research and our own lives. I also think it's harder to make new friends when you're older. It's harder to change your values when you're older, because you're already set in your ways. It's harder to accept other people's ideas when you are exchanging opinions. You just leave people with their own value.

Do your friends share these ideas, to your knowledge?

I have no idea. We never talk about that. We are more focused on Chinese culture and our own circle when we talk. Or we talk about research. We also gossip about our social circle, and talk about friends back home. We seldom talk about foreigners.

Do you think it might be interesting to talk about that together?

No, we don't have a lot of opinions or thoughts about that. There's not so much to talk about, it would be a very superficial conversation.

25. What are the most important differences between the Netherlands and China?

They're two totally different countries with their own cultures and lifestyles. Two separate systems. Not a lot of common points.

What are some parallels? What are the first things that come to mind when you think about these two countries?

China is where I was born and grew up, it is the place where I will go back and spend the rest of my life in. China also has a lot of pressure, peer pressure and pressure from outside. You have to work really hard. If you don't work hard, other people will work hard and you will get left behind. So you have to keep working really hard all the time to overcome that pressure. Chinese people are rolling themselves. If I go back to China, I have to work really hard, but if I stay in the Netherlands, I can *tangping*, which is the opposite of *neijuan*. I can just lie down and do what I want. And everyone in China says everyone in the western world can *tangping*. They don't have to work really hard, they are already developed. They have alternatives and choices. But Chinese people have no choice. If you don't *neijuan*, you will be left behind and live on the baseline. You will be poor, have no money and everyone will look down upon you. It's not just pressure from yourself, but also your family and the whole society. But in the Netherlands, you have the choice. You can refuse to work really hard. If you want to just be a delivery man, you can. But in China, only people who cannot have a better job will be a delivery man. There is a hierarchy there. And in China, people will always want to choose the job that makes the most amount of money. Like programming or finance, those get you a high salary. People work and study hard their entire lives. More people than before. But an important precondition is that you choose a good major in China, otherwise you will not get a good job and buy your own house. This is the most difficult thing for Chinese people, that they have to buy a house. I don't know that much about those things over here, but what I know is that you don't have pressure and you can make your own decision. If you don't work hard, and if you are not a post-graduate or PhD, and you just graduate from some vocational school, you can also have a fair job. Because the salaries are similar, right? The salary of a deliveryman is similar to that of a professor, right? I don't know. No? Hmm, okay, maybe I don't know Dutch society that well. But my friends all share the opinion that people in Western countries have a choice, and they don't have to work that hard. I can give you an example of Chinese pressure. One of the top electronic platforms, Jingdong, has a foreign shop here, named Ochama or something like that. For us, we will choose Jingdong because they are very efficient. If we order now, they will deliver to this building, and the service is very good. They won't go home after work. If Dutch people get home, they won't do any work. But Chinese will still work and provide service after work time. So Chinese people don't get a rest. They want to, but they have to keep working! Because otherwise, other companies and people will keep working, and they won't get money. Also, they have to work one day on the weekend. You go to work 6 days per week, and work from 9 to 9. This is a typical example of *neijuan*. It's very common in China. That's why China earns so much money, and why the efficiency is so high. I don't think they're happy, but they have to do that, they have no choice, especially when they want to buy a house. You can't marry a very good girl if your material conditions are not so good. If your material conditions are good, you can marry a good girl with good material conditions. Maybe you think it's ridiculous, but it's the fact of what is happening in China. Everyone has to work really hard. But it's very tiring. After being here for one

year, I'm afraid I won't be able to get used to that work pressure anymore. It will be even worse after 5 years, I am really afraid of that.

Any other things that come to mind?

The environment, food safety. In China, food is very unhealthy and unqualified. The air is also not fresh in China, a lot of people are suffering from lung diseases. There is a lot of pollution. But here, the sky is blue, the air is fresh, the water is clean, the food quality and safety is really high. Maybe the weather here is not as good as in China, the weather is much healthier and better for living.

26. What is the most interesting conversation you've had with a Dutch person?

I just heard about one thing from my friend. She has a Dutch boyfriend. He asked her if she could use a fork, spoon and knife. Maybe it's hard for Dutch people to use chopsticks. So maybe he thinks Chinese people don't know how to use a fork and knife. I think it's ridiculous, there are a lot of Western restaurants in China. Maybe we can't use it as good as chopsticks, but they think we can't use it at all. So I guess he doesn't know a lot about Chinese people. Maybe some people here or in other countries are very interested in Chinese people. They think China is getting better. China has a long history, and Chinese people have a totally different lifestyle, which is different from Western people. So they are really curious about Chinese people.

27. Would you recommend the Netherlands to your friends back home as a good place for studying?

Yes, and when I consider immigrating into another country, the Netherlands will be my first choice.

28. Do you have any questions for me?

I just want Western people to know the real China. Because I know a lot of people here watch a documentary about China, but those are not the facts. But all those documentaries are filled with prejudices, and they don't know the real China. It's just like how Chinese people are blocked and influenced by propaganda from the Chinese government, in the same way people here are blocked and influenced by propaganda from the Dutch media. The only difference is the degree. Maybe Chinese people are controlled more, that's the only difference. But all people are controlled by the government, and the government uses the media to block people's eyes and ears. But people here are interested in China, and they search the internet to learn about China. But only people like you, who can speak Chinese, will watch videos in native languages and hear the real information. People who don't speak Chinese will watch videos directed by Western people, and maybe the interviewees will not be native Chinese people but immigrants instead. They have their own opinions separate from the whole picture in China. That's one of the reasons I like this interview, where I can share my real thoughts and people like you can share your real opinions.

Twelfth and final interview: Sara

1. How long have you lived in the Netherlands?

Almost three years. I came here september 2019.

2. Why did you choose the Netherlands?

It was by chance, actually. I applied for a PhD degree, and I applied to the Netherlands and UK. The supervisor in the Netherlands gave me an offer, and I just came here directly. It's not about the country, but about the university.

3. What did you know about the Netherlands before coming here?

Basically just tulips and windmills.

4. Did you have any expectations about your life before coming here?

Let me think, it was almost three years ago. Maybe I had some little expectations. I thought I would travel a lot, take a lot of trips in European countries. I planned to, at least. Like, go to the UK or even Ukraine. But actually, after coming here, I found it was super difficult to start my PhD project. I was very busy, and I had to start my project immediately. I did not have any time to take a trip. When I was in China, we watched a lot of videos about life in America, or in the UK. I thought life would be a little bit fancy, and filled with a lot of parties and lovely things. But actually, when I came to the Netherlands, I realized that it was only a video, not real life. Real life is filled with books and data science. The Netherlands is quieter than I expected. I live in Chengdu. It's not a giant city, but it's a very crowded and busy city, even at night. At 12 o'clock, nightlife starts for everybody. But here, it's so quiet. Especially at 5 or even 7 o'clock, there is no outside noise as well. I can even hear the train station, even though it's so far from my window. It's too silent for me, so I had to get used to this environment. It was different from what I expected when I came to a foreign country.

Is this your first time abroad?

You could say that. It's my first time studying abroad. I have traveled to other Asian countries before, like Japan or Korea. They're very similar to China. I also went to Turkey and Ukraine, but only for travel. As a traveler, I felt everything was so fresh for me. But as a student, I have a different perspective. I experience a lot of pressure from my studies. As a traveler, I would just go looking for beautiful shops and environments, go hiking and take pictures. But as a student, life is so different. So this is my first time abroad as a student.

Did you party a lot back in China?

Yes, but not really partying. We just had a lot of nighttime activities, like playing games at night, watching movies or singing KTV. We did a lot of things together, because we lived together all the time.

5. What is your social network like here?

I have to say that I don't really have a social network here. I have my neighbors, but almost all of them are Chinese. I also have my colleagues in my office. During COVID, we didn't have a lot of opportunities to see each other, or work together. So that was not a very stable network. I also have some colleagues in the lab, and I spend almost all of my time in the lab. I see my supervisor, and senior & junior colleagues. Another network is my participants. That is also the only opportunity for me to meet Dutch people. I also met some Chinese people through that channel. So it helped to expand my social network. If I didn't do any experiments and research here, I don't think I would have a big enough network or opportunities to get in touch with people who live so far away from Leiden. Some of them even live in Groningen. They were really interested in my research, and they helped a lot.

What do you do in your free time?

I will cook. Cook for friends, or cook for neighbors. I bought an electronic piano, with earphones. But I cannot practice the whole day, so that kills one or two hours. I go hiking, and explore some small forests. I also traveled to Vienna for a classical music concert. Before coming here, I also expected there to be a lot of classical music concerts. Sadly, not so much. Aside from this, I don't know what to

do. I always think about this, how to kill my free time. Other Chinese students will also ask me this same question. And when I ask them the question, they just answer “sleep”. I also just watch some online videos.

Did your network change a lot because of COVID?

Yes, because a lot of my colleagues went back to China. I also went to a new building, and my neighbors changed. I did not have a lot of contact with them, because most of them are Chinese, and they are very nervous about the whole COVID situation. They did not even want to open their door. The first type of network was changed during COVID. The second one as well, because the lab was closed during COVID. We could still contact each other via email, but that is totally different. As for the third type, some of my participants became my friends. They helped me a lot. I’m still looking for other participants, so I think I can even expand this network more. Also, I even found my boyfriend among my participants. It really helped me a lot, otherwise I could not approach anybody. My boyfriend is Chinese, and he has been here for five years. He is now also a PhD student, and has a lot of experience with living in the Netherlands. He helps me a lot and gives me a lot of support.

6. Did you feel very panicked because of COVID?

It was okay. My family is not so nervous about China, and in Chengdu it’s not a very serious situation. In the Netherlands, we have a very serious lockdown. I was not so nervous, more lonely. The outside was even more silent than before, we cannot see anybody here, and during the first stage of lockdown I did not speak to anybody for more than two weeks. It made me feel so terrible. I went to some flower shop in Leiden Centraal, and that made me feel better. All the other things I wanted to do were closed. But I was not so nervous about COVID.

Did you go back to China?

No, I was here all the time and did not have any chance to go back. Also because of the flight ticket prices and long quarantine. The situation in Shanghai is also crazy right now. There’s no food for anyone, people have to wait all day to get vegetables.

7. How do you feel the Dutch government has handled the pandemic?

It’s super different from how the Chinese government handled it. The power of the Chinese government is very strong. There’s no other voice. If the Chinese government asks you to stay at home, you have to do this. You have no other options. But in the Netherlands, at first everything was locked down. But this did not last long. But with the restaurants being closed, they lost a lot of money, and the Dutch government cared about this and helped them. They stopped the lockdown, and restaurants opened again, everyone could go out again, and I think that’s okay. I think the Dutch government cared more about *xuqiu*, people’s needs and wishes. Also the needs of restaurants and businesses. But maybe the Chinese government had no other choice but to have dealt with it the way in which they did. There’s too many people in China, it’s really difficult to control the spread of COVID. I can understand that. But in Leiden and the Netherlands, that may be easier. That’s okay, even for now, my family in China asks me to wear a mask everywhere. But I personally have not worn a mask in a long time. They cannot understand this. They think we are living in a different world. We have different thoughts about what is happening in the world. That is a major difference, and I think it’s caused by policy.

Do you think the Dutch government has done a good job? Could they have done better?

I, personally, was not really affected that much, so I think they did well. So far, so good. I mean, I’m not a businessman, and I did not work. So for me, working from home is good, except for having to collect some data. But since I am not a citizen here, I think it’s okay for me. It didn’t affect my life too much.

And which way do you think is better, the Chinese or Dutch way?

I think it depends. In the first stage of COVID, there were not a lot of infections, and I think the Chinese policy worked really well. We just locked down for one month, and after that, everything was fine and everything opened again. But now, it has been almost three years. Is it still necessary for us to lock down again and again? Especially for a city like Shanghai, the GDP decreased dramatically. Not just for the GDP, but also the shops and factories. How can they deal with that? Maybe they got too huge and general. What about the small citizens, especially older generations? They don't know how to use smartphones, they have no idea how to use their phones to buy vegetables, or how to take tests. They can't even work. Every time, a volunteer has to ask everyone to get downstairs and wait in line. That is an actual experience of one of my friends living in Shanghai. What about the older generations? They are 80 to 90 years old, how can they deal with that? It's so helpless. Other people, like farmers, didn't have a lot of money. Not even a fridge at home, even though you live with 5 people in one small house. But rich people can find ways to store enough food and paper. That's weird, for now, even though these measures really worked at first. But is it necessary to do it again and again, after three years? But we cannot do anything, especially us living outside our own country.

8. How do you feel the regulations here differ from those in China?

Strictness is the biggest difference. Policies and regularity are not so strict over here, and China is super strict. From my perspective, that's okay, even though things in the Netherlands are not so strict. I think it depends more on the person itself. In China, you have the police who enforce the rules. That's too strict, I think. In China, everyone needs to have a specific QR-code, otherwise you can't go anywhere. But in the Netherlands, the situation is pretty okay. You only need to have a QR code to show you're vaccinated. So that's different. And in the Netherlands, if you feel sick, you don't need to go to the hospital, it's not mandatory. In China, you have to do this. Maybe in the Netherlands, the government is more concerned about people's privacy. In China, they are more concerned about the larger population.

9. Did you understand all of the regulations here?

I think I understood. From a student's perspective, the only irregularity I had to follow was in the lab and university. But in restaurants and other shops, I did not know all of them.

10. How did you acquire the information?

My manager spread the lab regulations, and we had to read them thoroughly. We also had several meetings, and our supervisor told us to really follow the regulations because otherwise the lab would shut down.

11. Do you feel the Dutch government could have done better in spreading this information to exchange students?

If they would, I would be grateful, but I have already gotten used to the situation here. I can't give any advice or suggestions on this.

12. Did you actively follow the news regarding COVID?

At first, yes, but because I was feeling quite nervous about the rising numbers, I preferred not to look at the news every day. Just leave me be in a quiet and peaceful environment, so I have no idea how serious the situation is at the moment. But I know how serious it is in Shanghai, because there is so much news about that. Even though it does make me feel a bit nervous.

13. Aside from your work in the lab, was your daily life affected by the regulations?

We had to wear masks, and also check if participants were vaccinated. That made us feel a bit weird, and it felt weird to reject them if they were not vaccinated. Also keeping 1.5 meters distance was hard in the lab, because it is a very small lab. Also, we could only have 4 people in the lab at a time. Outside of the lab, it's easier for me to approach more people. I was super nervous during COVID. Even my neighbors didn't want to hang out with me. Life outside the lab was super boring. Nobody even wanted to walk with me, even though there was no one on the street. People were still afraid.

14. Did you want to contact friends and family more, because of your loneliness?

I wanted to, but my friends and family are far away from me. Even though I can talk to them, they can't really help me. They cannot know and understand what exactly happened in the Netherlands. They live in a completely different country. They cannot understand how silent and stressful life is here. Also, as a child, I don't want my parents to worry too much. But my father always supports me. He said I could give up my PhD if I wanted to, I can come back any time. I won't, of course, but it feels good to have more options. My parents would even want to pay for my super expensive plane ticket back to China. They always support all of my decisions. But I have to learn how to live on my own, and be independent.

15. Did you have a lot of trouble getting used to the Dutch way of life?

Mostly the food. Why are there only sandwiches and bread here? I'm so used to all of the delicious foods from Sichuan. The second challenge is the language, because in China I didn't hear anything about Dutch language. I took some Dutch courses, and thought it was super difficult. But learning Dutch is useful, it helped me to get used to the market environment. I know some basic Dutch things and words now. The third challenge is the weather. But that's almost the same as in Chengdu, it's very cloudy there. The wind here is so strong, though. People back home can't understand how a wind can be so strong that it makes daily life more uncomfortable.

16. Do you have a strong wish to connect with Dutch people?

At first, I did. But for now, I only have a strong wish to connect with Dutch participants. I do think it's helpful to connect to Dutch people, so you can know more about the local culture and lifestyle. It's different from in the UK. It's very special here. But for me, because I have been here for almost three years, and still have not connected to many Dutch people, I think I didn't have such a strong wish for connection, I suppose. I have just gotten used to my environment and comfort zone here. So it's okay. But if I want to stay here for a longer time, or perhaps even immigrate, I will have a stronger wish to gather more Dutch friends. I have some Dutch contacts, but they are just my internship students. Also, my free time doesn't allow for a lot of social connections. I do think I'm more lucky than my friends in Shanghai. They worry too much about their basic daily needs, they don't have the luxury to worry about their PhD project.

17. Do you think Dutch people are easy to connect to?

Yeah, they're very friendly, especially in Leiden. I know the people here are different from people in other cities, because most of the people here are students. I think they're open minded, friendly, and sometimes give very positive feedback on your studies and interests. It's easy to approach them. But I don't know how other people view this. I have to say, I'm not so familiar with other cities, so I can't make a conclusion on that. I heard from some friends of mine in Italy and France that they have to be much more careful in approaching people, especially since they're Chinese. But the Netherlands is very open, so I think this is a definite advantage. Dutch people treat everybody equally. I didn't face any difficulties in contacting Dutch people, especially people from Chinastudies. They helped me a lot. My supervisor is not Dutch, though.

18. How do you feel Dutch people responded to the lockdown?

I actually did not have any conversations with them about this. I did overhear some high school students, the children of my supervisor. They prefer to stay at home and take online courses, rather than actually go to high school. In high school, they have to open the windows to keep fresh air coming on, even in winter. Other than that, I think most adult Dutch people did not like the lockdown, because they could not meet with others. Their social life was affected a lot. But I didn't talk about this a lot with Dutch people. I did feel a bit unsafe when going to the supermarket, because it was so crowded.

19. Were there any COVID regulations that really surprised you, or maybe you did not see the use of or understand?

If I have to pick one, it would be the direction arrows in university buildings. I think that's a little bit stupid.

20. How has the lockdown influenced your studio performance?

Aside from what I mentioned about finding participants, I found I was staying home a lot more, because being the only person in the lab and building made me feel even more lonely.

21. What about your mental health?

So yeah, very lonely, but I have gotten more used to it. Besides that, I got pretty close to a burnout. That made me really think about what is important in life. So emotionally, I am now more focused on what makes me happy in life and the people around me, and less on my career and study pressure. So you could say that COVID has changed my career plans. We will see what will happen.

22. Did you experience any discrimination because of COVID?

I didn't go outside very often. I had one experience, when I went to the AH at night, and it's a bit far away from my apartment. I was the only person in the street, and there were some high school students riding their motorbike. They passed me, and spit on me. But they're teenagers. They can't control themselves. Other than that, Dutch people are very fair and friendly. My friends were very worried for me, though.

23. How do you feel your Chinese background and identity influence your social position here?

My boyfriend is also Chinese, and his major is law. He's focused on international relationships, and Chinese identity in a foreign country. He thinks that maybe, because we're from a completely different country and have a different identity from Western countries, he thinks that Chinese people have a hard time really integrating in the Netherlands. Some of my friends want to immigrate here and really integrate. But they found that they don't feel accepted here. I didn't contact a lot of Dutch people, but when I connect with people from Chinastudies and people like you, I feel much more comfortable. Because you are more interested in China and maybe understand Chinese culture. I don't have a very strong wish to express myself to other Dutch people who don't have this understanding and interest, maybe also to protect myself. Maybe that's also because of Chinese nature? We don't have a strong wish to express ourselves and share our thoughts. So this cultural background is expressed through how we connect with others. I can be more open with people like you, though.

24. Do you feel Chinese students have a different social position from other exchange students?

Maybe. Chinese students tend to only want to connect with Chinese students. When I first came here, I wanted to connect more with Dutch citizens, because I thought it would be the most efficient way to understand Dutch culture. The funny thing is I did not meet any Japanese students here.

25. Did your stay here make you more aware of your Chinese identity?

Maybe, yes, because this is a foreign country.

26. How would you define Chinese identity?

That's so hard to answer. I didn't think about this before. I think the first is language. That's the most important. The second is Asian face. But I saw some Asian people but they spoke Dutch. So language is the most important. I also think it's a feeling? Even in China, when I'm in a group, I just follow my feelings. If I meet someone I feel a connection with, I can tell we are following the same brain waves, and then we connect well. It's a special feeling. Even when I'm abroad, I can feel that I share a similar cultural background with Chinese people. Chinese people also care more about their family. I don't know how to express it, it's just a connection.

27. How would you describe the typical Chinese person?

It depends. Let's say students. He or she will be super hard working, and very polite. Very quiet and shy, not so outgoing. Maybe when he or she is talking, they will look you straight in the eyes. After class and during the break, they will be shy and focus all their time on their studies. They don't have a very exciting personal life. They will care a lot about their family, their parents, and they will contact them regularly. They might look very simple and boring, but actually, when you talk with them about their interests and major, they have a lot to say. If you ask them to do some leisure activity, they might say they're too busy. But if you face some personal difficulties, they will always help and comfort you. But they're very introverted, and will remain that way unless you force them. Oftentimes, people think I'm too outgoing. But I feel I'm actually quite introverted. I will be friendly with everybody. I like staying alone, especially after COVID.

28. What are the biggest differences between the Netherlands and China?

I think the biggest one is baorongxing, tolerance. Tolerance in the Netherlands is very high, you can do anything you want as long as it's legal. You can wear a dress as a guy, if you want. In China, you have to follow the general rules. If you wear a dress as a guy in the streets in China, people will think you are so strange. The older generation might openly criticize you. So the tolerance level is quite low in China. We were not allowed to make mistakes in primary school. We could not speak loudly, or run in the hallways. Everyone in the young generation is under super high pressure. Other people will judge you if you don't have a Master's degree, or if you are a 40 year old who goes to university. They'll think you are a loser. If you are a woman, and don't have a boyfriend by the age of 30, they will think you're not a good lady. Same thing goes for a 40 year old man. Everyone, even friends and family, will criticize you. You have to follow the set track that everybody follows. You are not allowed to make mistakes. The pressure is so high. But in the Netherlands, you are free to do what you want. I could still go to university if I'm an old lady. That's fine here. So that's why a lot of Chinese students want to go abroad, even though they know the culture is so different from back home. They really like tolerance.

29. Did your stay here change you and your world view?

Yes. Like I said, I used to be a very ambitious person. I followed a PhD because I felt I had to, simply because I did a Master's. But after coming here, I realized that maybe constantly trying to reach a higher position is not the goal of life. I lose a lot of my life if I only focus on research. Maybe I should

balance my work and life much more, and care more about myself instead of just other people's opinions and peer pressure. I should care more about my mental health. Why compete all the time? Why not increase the tolerance level? If I don't reach my study goals, but learn a lot of things in the process, then it's still worthwhile. So I try to enjoy the process a lot more. Maybe enjoying life is more important. I can also tolerate and respect other people with different views a lot more now. In China, you have to make quick conclusions and form opinions instantly. Decide if someone is a nice person or not as soon as you meet them. But here, you have more time. The world is not black and white, and people can not be marked and pushed into a corner like that. I am also much more willing to listen to others now. I can be more patient, and think twice before I simply give my own conclusion.

30. Do you define yourself more as Asian or Chinese here?

Maybe Chinese. It also depends. If I work with my Indonesian colleagues, I consider myself more Asian. But if I'm by myself, I'm Chinese.

31. Did your stay here also change the way you view China?

Yes, it has changed. In China, we are just focused on our own environment. But here, I have learned so many new perspectives. I have been here for a long time, and have changed my point of views about China. Before coming here, I said that the Chinese COVID policy is perfect, because it is the only policy I know. But after coming here, I can compare and draw different conclusions. The world is not black and white. I can also be more tolerant and objective when looking at Chinese people, because I can understand their way of thinking better.

32. What's your current view of the Netherlands?

I just talked about this with my friends. If we had to choose a country to live in besides China, it would be the Netherlands. Maybe France or Sweden is much more beautiful, but we would still choose the Netherlands. We will be accepted by everyone, and we can just be ourselves.

Was this view influenced by COVID?

No. I wanted to go back at first, but I got used to the situation here very quickly. I did become more confused about the situation of the world by COVID. The world is not black and white, and we have to think carefully about what we really want. It really depends on different situations.

33. What is the most interesting conversation you've had with a Dutch person?

I haven't had a lot of interesting or deep conversations with Dutch people. One thing I experienced was when I was relaxing with some of my internship students. They were very curious about China and Chinese culture. Even though we interacted for 3 months, they had never asked me about this before. So that made me think maybe more people in the Netherlands are interested in China and Chinese culture. So maybe people should take more time to sit together and get to know each other's culture and personal life more. In China, this does not happen. The first day you meet someone, people always ask about your very basic personal things. Where do you live, how much money do you make, etc. The disadvantage of the Dutch situation is that this kind of conversation only happens when you really sit down together and relax.