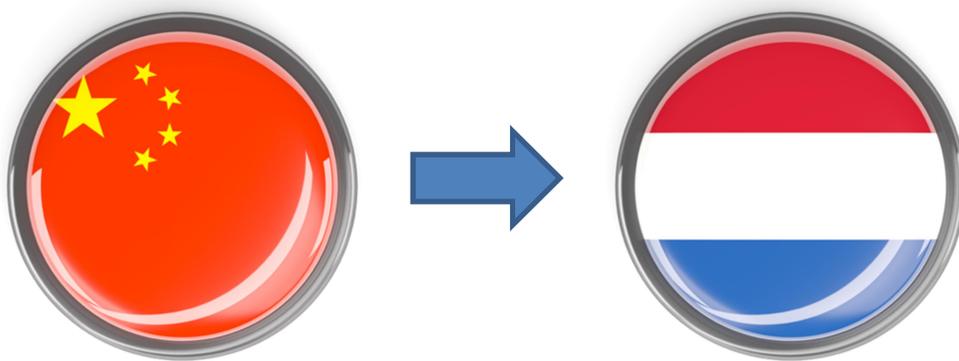


BACHELOR THESIS:

International Student Migration

**ACADEMIC TRANSITIONAL ISSUES
FACED BY CHINESE STUDENTS:
A CASE STUDY AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF GRONINGEN**



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Summary

International students often face numerous challenges while adapting to the culture of the host-institute. China is the top exporter of international students worldwide, with Western countries often being the most attractive destinations. However, due to the large cultural differences between Western and Asian educational environments, adjustment is thought to be particularly challenging for this group of international students. Unfortunately, only limited research has directly explored the experiences and issues faces by Chinese students as they transition from Chinese to European academic environments.

The aim of this research is to examine the challenges of Chinese students' academic adjustment through a case study at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. More specifically, this research seeks to address the following central question:

"Which academic transitional issues do Chinese students face when adjusting to the academic environment of the University of Groningen?"

By the means of semi-structured in-depth interviews with Chinese students and institutional experts, differences between the culture of higher education in China and the culture of higher education in the Netherlands are identified, as were additional transitional issues, including language barriers and time management.

The results indicate that language barriers are the most important academic transitional issues that Chinese students face during their adjustment process to the academic environment of the University of Groningen, while cultural differences between Asian and Western and educational environments can also be barriers during the process of academic adjustment.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Background

China is the top exporter of international students worldwide (UNESCO, 2013). A large number of Chinese students are attracted by Western countries. However, due to the cultural differences between Western and Asian countries, adjusting is particularly challenging for this group of international students (Wang & Hannes, 2013). Some educators believe that international students are not sufficiently adjusted, both academically and socially, to higher education in their host country. They often face numerous challenges while adapting to the culture of the host-institute, but at the same time they are expected to handle the same academic demands and expectations (Valka, 2015). Different classroom instruction, communication with teachers, and study techniques are other challenges they face.

Limited research has addressed whether academic performance is influenced by transitional issues (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013). With 247 students, Chinese students are the largest non-European group of international students at the University of Groningen (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2016). The importance of adjustment of foreign students to the host university is a critical issue (Janjua et al., 2011). As a result, challenges that this particular group of international students face should be reduced to a minimum. The research gives new insights in which academic transitional issues Chinese students face when adjusting to the academic environment of the University of Groningen through a case study. To ensure successful academic adjustment, the university has to draw on students' experience. The University of Groningen can use these insights to support international students and manage their academic adjustment more efficiently.

1.2 Research problem

The aim of this research is to examine the challenges of Chinese students' academic adjustment through a case study at the University of Groningen. This leads to the following central question:

"Which academic transitional issues do Chinese students face when adjusting to the academic environment of the University of Groningen?"

To answer the central question, the following secondary questions were formulated:

- How is academic adjustment defined in previous research?
- What are the main differences between the culture of higher education in China and the culture of higher education in the Netherlands?

- Which additional academic transitional issues play a role during the process of academic adjustment?

Answering these secondary through a combination of analysing the primary data (qualitative interviews) and secondary data (literature review) will lead to answering the central question.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is structured as follows: In Chapter 2, the concepts and theories that are relevant to the research will be presented. Chapter 3 will discuss the choice of research method , and how data was collected and analysed. In Chapter 4, the results will be presented and discussed in the context of the theory. Finally, the main results are summarized in Chapter 5. Also, limitations of the research will be discussed and recommendations for future research will be made in this final chapter.

Chapter 2 – Theoretical framework

This chapter will present the theories and concepts that are relevant to the research. More specifically, the academic relevance of theories and concept for the research will be made clear and discussed, and will finally be presented in a conceptual model.

2.1 'Academic adjustment'

Janjua et al. (2011) describe adjustment as a dynamic and interactive process, which is directed towards an achievement of the fit between a person and the environment. Put in an academic context, academic adjustment is the fit of a student in the academic environment. Academic adjustment can be seen as how successful students cope with a variety of educational demands, including motivation, application, performance and satisfaction with the academic environment (Baker & Siryk, 1999, in Rienties et al., 2011). Adding to this, Valka (2015) describes academic adjustment as the learning outcomes of students and their fulfilment of course requirements. According to her, academic adjustment can predict study-performance in terms of obtained credits. Valka (2015) offers a number of suggestions in her research for measures that can be taken to support international students and manage their academic adjustment: a comprehensive guide which would include information about the core issues for international students and also academic staff members; an adaption week during which international students are acquainted with the faculty and academic staff; preparatory courses for international students; a module of study courses separately for language specialists and non-language specialists; equal demands as host students, thus understanding the procedures and practices of course work and assessment; students-mentors or peer support programmes; and an international student coordinator. However, she doesn't suggest language courses in English or in the host countries' language.

A main finding from research by Rienties & Tempelaar (2013) is that the cultural dimensions of Hofstede (1986; Hofstede et al., 2010) predict academic adjustment and academic performance. These cultural dimensions will be described in the following paragraph.

2.2 Cultural differences as an academic transitional issue

International students may experience a culture shock when the host university's behaviours, educational organisation and expectations differ from those of the students' culture (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013). Teacher-student interaction is

rooted deeply in the culture of societies, which makes cross-cultural learning situations problematic for both parties (Hofstede, 1986). For international students who make a relatively small cross-cultural transition (e.g. from Germany to the Netherlands), adjustment is easier than for those who make a large cross-cultural transition (e.g. from China to the Netherlands) (Ward & Kennedy, 1993, in Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013).

In research by Hofstede (1986; Hofstede et al., 2010), differences between cultures were conceptualized. He identified four dimensions in which problems may lie: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1986). These dimensions, aspects of a culture that can be measured relative to other cultures, impact learning and teaching (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013).

In an educational context, power distance refers to teacher-student relationships. In countries with a large-power-distance like China, teachers are treated with respect and students might even fear their teachers (Hofstede et al., 2010). There is supposed to be strict order in the classroom and the teacher decides on which intellectual paths to follow. In countries with small power-distance like the Netherlands, students are expected to ask questions and express criticisms and disagreement in class. Teachers and students are supposed to treat each other as equals: students are expected to socialise with their teachers, and usually they call each other by their first name (Wu, 2008). Knowledge in the Netherlands is gained through critical analysis, while in Asia students dare not challenge their teachers (Wu, 2008).

At school, individualism versus collectivism refers to the ties between students. In the individualist classroom, like in the Netherlands, confrontations and discussion are encouraged and education aims at preparing the individual for a place in a society of other individuals (Hofstede et al., 2010). In the collectivist classroom, like in China, students conceive themselves as part of a group and will hesitate to speak up. Maintaining face and harmony are important virtues. Differences between students from collectivist - and individualist countries are visible in class: Chinese students in the Netherlands might not speak up in class discussions or in groups composed of relatively strangers.

The third cultural dimension that Hofstede identifies is masculinity versus femininity. In masculine countries such as China, the best students are the norm. Parents expect their children to try to match the best, students compete openly with each other and failure in school is a disaster. However, in feminine countries such as

the Netherlands, excellence is something someone keeps to oneself and the average student is the norm. This raises the possibility that Chinese students who attempt to excel and openly show their excellence might get ridiculed in the Netherlands.

Uncertainty avoidance is the fourth of Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Students from countries with strong uncertainty avoidance such as China expect their teachers to have all the answers. Teachers are the experts, learning situations are structured with precise goals, assignments are detailed and timetables are strict (Hofstede et al., 2010). In weak uncertainty-avoidance countries like the Netherlands, teachers are allowed to say "*I don't know*". Learning situations are open-ended with vague objectives, assignments are broadly defined and there are no timetables. As a consequence, Chinese students in the Netherlands might lack creativity and originality since they are used to knowledge being handed to them by their teachers.

2.3 Additional academic transitional issues

Besides differences in culture of education, additional academic adjustment plays a role in the process of academic adjustment. According to Wang & Hannes (2013), these challenges can be summarized into four broad themes: academic activities, academic resources, language barriers and time management.

In relation to academic activities, Wang & Hannes identify three subthemes: curricular-related activities, scientific research and extra-curricular academic activities. Secondly, in relation to academic resources, they identify two subthemes: libraries, and other hardware and software resources. Then, in relation to language barriers, academic English and the host country's native language are identified as two subthemes. Hofstede et al. (2010) note that without knowing the host country's native language, one will miss a lot of the subtleties of a culture and as a consequence will be forced to remain a relative outsider. There are no subthemes identified in relation to time management. According to Wang & Hannes (2013), participants in their study experienced various kinds of academic difficulties within the four broad themes mentioned above, including challenges in reading course materials in English, conducting scientific research, utilizing university facilities, and time management. Valka (2015) also mentions the heavy academic workload, and the expected English language knowledge level: advanced.

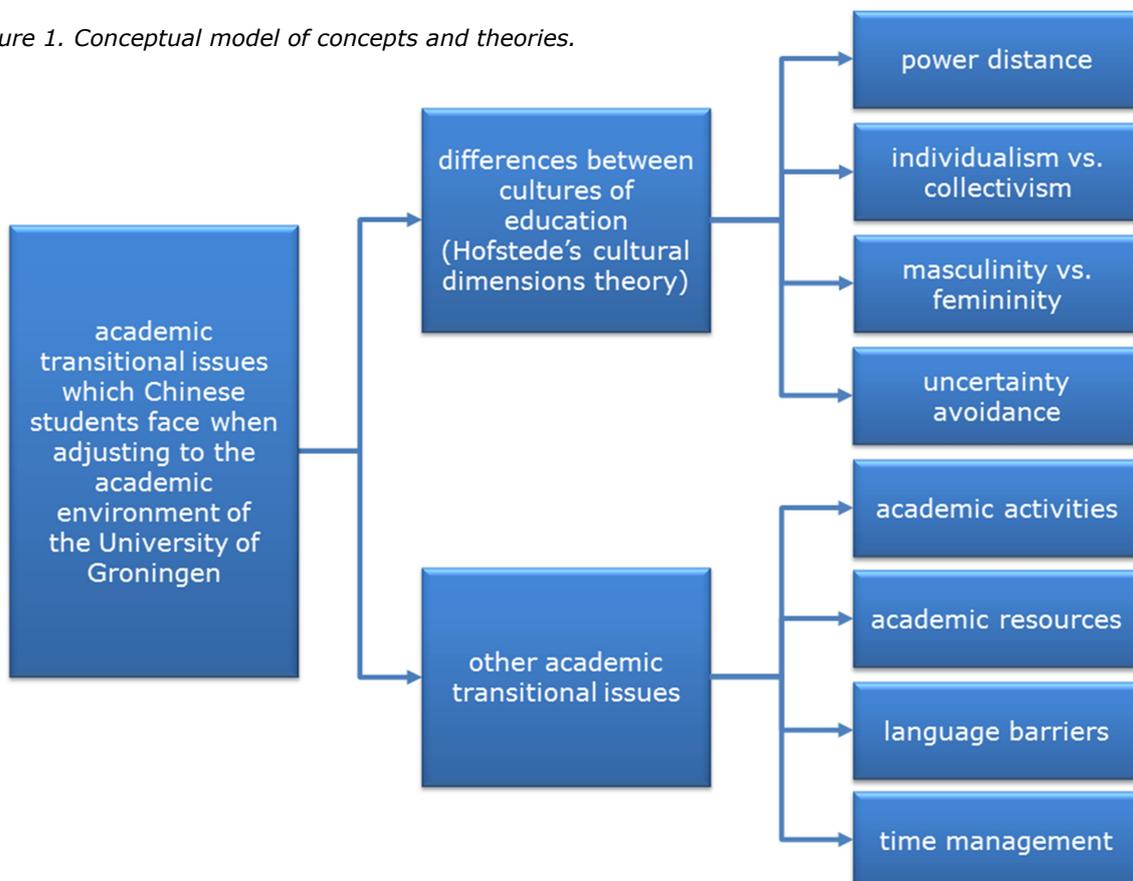
Wu (2008) notes that language is the most significant transitional issue for international students. Spaulding and Flack (1976, in Wu, 2008) argue that international students' language proficiency has a huge influence on their academic

performance and adjustment. Reinick (1986, in Wu, 2008) notes that many of international students' problems are related to their second language proficiency. In academic life, the most serious language problems that international students have to overcome are writing academic English, reading assignments, participating in class discussions and giving presentations (Tanaka, 2002, in Wu, 2008). Heikinheimo and Shute (1986, in Wu, 2008) identified additional issues, concerning attending lectures in English, answering class questions and writing essays. Wu concludes that writing in academic English is the most serious issue that international students face.

2.4 Conceptual model

The concepts and theories presented earlier in this chapter are visually represented (see Figure 1). This conceptual model can be described as follows: the academic issues that Chinese students face when adjusting to the academic environment of the University of Groningen can be divided in two categories: differences in the cultures of education between China and the Netherlands, and additional academic transitional issues. Both these categories can be divided into sub-categories.

Figure 1. Conceptual model of concepts and theories.



Firstly, the differences between the cultures of education between China and the Netherlands can be divided in Hofstede's four cultural dimensions: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and uncertainty avoidance. Secondly, the additional academic transitional issues can be divided into the following subcategories: academic activities, academic resources, language barriers and time management. However, these academic transitional issues might not be the only issues Chinese students face when adjusting to the academic environment of the University of Groningen. We might discover more academic transitional issues by the means of the semi-structured in-depth interviews. The method of data collection will be described in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

In this chapter, the choice of research method in relation to the research questions is described. The kind of data collection, the data analysis and ethical considerations are also addressed in this chapter.

3.1 Research method

The aim of the research is to obtain a detailed account of what participants think and experience with regards to a specific phenomenon. Qualitative interviews are appropriate here, because interpretation of relevant concepts and theories can be cross-checked with the participants (Blumberg et al., 2011). Because the research problem refers to a complex problem area, and the aim is to detect and identify the issues relevant to understanding the situation, semi-structured interviews are particularly useful in this research. Semi-structured interviews are conversational and informal in tone. They have some degree of predetermined order, but still flexibility in the way issues are addressed by the informant is ensured (Dunn, 2005, in Longhurst, 2010). In this way, participants are offered the chance to explore issues they feel are important and insight can be gained into what is relevant to participants. As Blumberg et al. (2011) suggest, an interview guide containing a list of specific questions was used to ensure that necessary areas are covered in the interview.

3.2 Data collection

By the means of semi-structured interviews with Chinese students and institutional experts, differences between the culture of higher education in China and the culture of higher education in the Netherlands are identified, as were other transitional issues including academic activities, academic resources, language barriers and time management. While interviewing the Chinese students (n=8) will give new insights in which academic transitional issues Chinese students face when adjusting to the academic environment of the University of Groningen, the interviews with the institutional experts (n=2) will offer a different perspective from the educational side. As a result, two interview guides were used during this research. Both interview guides are included as appendices: one interview guide for the Chinese students (see APPENDIX A) and one interview guide for the institutional experts (see APPENDIX B).

Participants were contacted through international student coordinators at the University of Groningen. As suggested by Denzin (1970, in Longhurst, 2010).

interviews were held in a relatively neutral setting. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research, expected duration and procedures. They were also asked for permission to audio record the interview. Of course, certain ethical standers were met when conducting the interviews. Two important ethical issues are anonymity and confidentiality (Longhurst, 2010). Firstly, participants were ensured before each interview they remain anonymous. Secondly, participants were ensured all information supplied will remain confidential. The data collected was accessible by password only. Also, participants had the right to withdraw from the research at any time without explanation. At the end of each interview, the participants were asked if they were interested in a summary of the results at the completion of the research. This is, according to Longhurst (2010), sound research practice.

Combining and analysing the results of both the literature review and semi-structured in-depth interviews will ultimately lead to answering the secondary questions, and as a result the central question.

3.3 Analysis of data

Coding was used to evaluate and organise the data collected through the in-depth interviews, since coding can help to identify patterns (Cope, 2010). Codes and themes were be based on the categories and subcategories presented in the conceptual model. Codes were based on the 8 subcategories and themes were based on the two categories: differences between cultures of education, and other academic transitional issues. By using these codes and themes, data was as a result connected to the secondary questions and as a result to the central question.

Chapter 4 – Results

In this Chapter, the results from the in-depth interviews will be discussed. The analysis of the data will be linked to the relevant theories and concepts which can be found in Chapter 2. At the beginning of every interview, each Chinese participant was asked where he or she lived in China. A map of the participants' home cities can be found in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Map of participants' home cities in China.



4.1 Differences between cultures of education

During the in-depth interviews, participants were asked to describe the Chinese educational environment and to compare the culture of education in China to the culture of education in the Netherlands. More specifically, Hofstede's four cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1986; Hofstede et al., 2010) were used to identify the most important differences between both cultures.

4.1.1 Power difference

It became clear from the interviews that the power difference in China is large. Consequently, students are expected to respect their teachers and there is minimal interaction between teachers and student. According to one participant, "it's

like everything should be controlled by teacher" (Participant 5). In contrast, interaction with teachers is according to the participants informal of nature and teachers and students treat each other as equals. A female participant experienced the informal interaction with teachers as a barrier: *"I have to get used call my supervisor by his first name, a little bit difficult, to be honest. That is against culture in China"* (Participant 6).

4.1.2 Individualism vs. collectivism

In an educational context, individualism versus collectivism refers to the ties between students. A number of participants mentioned problems when adjusting to the academic environment of the University of Groningen. In China, it is not common practice for students to speak up in class, while according to one participant, in the Netherlands *"you have to be quite active in lectures. Especially you need to be, I would say brave enough to talk with your supervisor, your teacher"* (Participant 6). Hofstede et al. (2010) explain this by pointing out that in China, students conceive themselves as part of a group. Participant 7 gave an example of Dutch and German students criticizing Chinese students for not performing well in group work, while in China teammates will not criticize each other and will tend to avoid conflicts.

4.1.3 Masculinity vs. femininity

In all interviews, it became clear that the nature of education in China is very competitive: students compete openly with each other and try to excel. The importance of getting high grades and outcompeting other students were mentioned frequently. According to most of the participants, the reason of this is the large population of China. Asked if education in China is characterized by competition, one participant responded: *"Yeah, because we have a large population, you know. So not everyone who wants to get into college can get into college"* (Participant 1). As a result, entrance requirements are high. One participant illustrated this as follow: *"It's very difficult to get in. Because the competition with, very high, you need very good grades to be accepted into the good universities"* (Participant 7). On a side note, the same participant states that in China, *"it's quite easy to get a degree in universities. So even if you don't perform so well, you still can be given Bachelor's diploma"*. Two more participants echoed this statement. According to one of them, students who get into a good university, *"they feel like university is kind of paradise. They can release, you know"* (Participant 3). This contrast is not described in research by Hofstede (1986; Hofstede et al., 2010), nor did I find it in other literature. While the

Netherlands is in contrast a feminine country where one keeps excellence to oneself (Hofstede et al., 2010), none of the participants encountered problems when adjusting to this feminine education environment.

4.1.4 Uncertainty avoidance

It became clear from the interviews that China is a country with strong uncertainty avoidance. Characteristics of this strong uncertainty avoidance which participants mentioned include structured learning situations, strict timetables, and detailed projects. One participant lively illustrated this: *"So in China normally we quite, duck feeding system. It's like the teachers tell you, tell you, like feeding ducks"* (Participant 3). According to all of the participants, the Chinese education is mainly focused on preparing for entrance exams.

The transition from this strong uncertainty avoidance to the academic environment was challenging for a number of participants. One participant recalled: *"my promotors are really used to say: 'your Chinese students really need to open your mind and have the courage to judge someone's opinion', to defence yourself, to argue that, but that's exactly what we lack"* (Participant 4). Other participants also mentioned this lack of creativity and critical thinking. Since teachers in China hand knowledge to students, they are not trained in these skills.

4.2 Language barriers

Besides the differences between educational environments, participants were also asked about their thoughts on studying in English. In all interviews the participants mentioned language barriers as the most significant barrier that Chinese students have to overcome when adjusting to the academic environment of the University of Groningen. These language barriers were also mentioned in previous literature (Valka, 2015; Wang & Hannes, 2013; Wu, 2008) .

4.2.1 Attending courses and reading course materials in English

Especially in the beginning, English tends to be really challenging for Chinese students. Most participants encountered serious transitional issues related to their English proficiency, especially after they just arrived in the Netherlands. Often, they are expected to have an advanced English language knowledge level (Valka, 2015). However, according to an institutional expert (Participant 9), the English proficiency of Chinese students is, compared to other students, often quite low at the very start of their studies. Their English language knowledge does improve a lot during their stay in the Netherlands and when they finally graduate, their English proficiency is (in general) comparable to other students. Still, it became clear from the interviews

that at the start of their programme reading course materials or scientific articles took them much longer. One participant felt that reading was *"the problem at the very beginning, I can read the references very slowly and only maybe one article per day, but currently I can read 8 or 10 or something like that and get the main ideas from the articles"* (Participant 4).

Participants mentioned a variety of possible explanations, including the quality English education in China, the lack of an 'English environment' in China, and the large differences between English and Chinese. Most of the participants felt like the English education they had in China didn't prepare them well enough to study at the University of Groningen. One participant pointed out that *"all my English teacher in China is Chinese. Is not native speaker"* (Participant 2). A lot of participants also refer to an 'English environment'. A few examples of this environment in the Netherlands are:

"As far as I know, at a very early age the Dutch already accept the English, the second or third language education here. But during my time, I just get English education when I was 16. Or earlier, like 14" (Participant 4).

"I think I practice my English, improve my English a lot during this year, 'cos you have an environment. You also need to have to contact, speak with your classmates all in English" (Participant 1).

"And you have better language environment because Europe is very mixed" (Participant 2).

Finally, Chinese students note that while Dutch and English are quite similar languages, Chinese and English are totally different. According to one participant, *"Dutch is kind of similar as English, so it's kind of easier for you to speak English. And also the way of thinking is kind of western way of thinking. My way of thinking, it's like Chinese way"* (Participant 3).

4.2.2 Attending courses and reading course materials in English

At the very beginning, some of the participants found it particularly challenging to read course materials and to attend courses in English, while others were already used to using textbooks written in English during their education in China. All the participants who encountered some problems at the beginning said it was a matter of practice. So while research by Wang & Hannes (2013) suggests that reading course materials in English is an important barrier during the academic adjustment process, none of the participants in this research classified it as so.

4.2.3 Speaking in English

A majority of the participants said participating in class discussions and presenting in English were difficult for them, especially at the beginning. *"I still remember when I first came here, my first block, the first meeting, I didn't say anything in the discussion, in the group discussion. Because I can't understand my partner, my teammate. And I don't know how to, I don't know how to say it"* (Participant 2). She explained this by noting that *"in China is mainly about writing and reading, so I didn't practice my speaking a lot. So when I first came here, if our professor gave me a slide, I can understand it, but if I want to answer the questions, I only can say the words. I don't know complete sentence. So it's really need to practice"*. Other participants described similar difficulties.

4.2.4. Writing in English

It became clear from the interviews that writing in English is a major issue during the process of academic adjustment. One participant said that *"the problem lays in the formal part, for the accurate part. Maybe we need to improve more about how to write it more correctly, not just write down the expression"* (Participant 1). Another participant added that it is not only about language, but also about a different way of thinking: *"It's all difficult, 'cos not just grammar, it's just the style. What kind of way you have to present your work. So it's still challenging, it's not just the language. It's something related to how we think"*. In her research, Wu (2008) also concludes that writing in academic English is the most serious issue that international students face. However, a third respondent noted that *"it's a problem for all the students, also the Dutch students"* (Participant 2). This sentiment was confirmed in an interview with an institutional expert (Participant 10).

4.3 Academic adjustment

4.3.1 Support from the University of Groningen

In general, participants were satisfied with the measures taken by the University of Groningen to help them successfully academic adjust. Most students referred to specific courses on language barriers:

"Yeah, they organize some lectures, actually I already attend like three lectures about the English writing. I would say it's really helpful and useful. I can feel my writing ability has improved" (Participant 4).

"But I think they, our faculty, they did try it. At least I remember that courses specifically for Chinese students. They specifically pick up what the Chinese

student often make mistake in grammar, in words picking, so they try to teach. So I think that's quite one" (Participant 6).

It is interesting that in her research, Valka (2015) suggests both preparatory courses for international students and a module of study courses separately for language specialists and non-language specialists in her research, though she does not mention language courses specifically.

4.3.2 Academic demands

Chinese students are expected to handle the same academic demands as other students. They also think this is fair, because in the end every student in the end earns the same degree. One of the institutional experts (Participant 10) explained that all students are admitted based on their academic performance. Country of origin does not play a role in the admission process. As a consequence, the output of all students are evaluated in the same way. So Chinese students are expected to handle the same academic standards and requirements as other students, for example Dutch students, do. Students do not feel like this is a barrier they have to overcome. In contrast, in her research Valka (2015) identified the expectation of handling the same academic demands as an important barrier. Asked for thoughts on the fairness of equal demands, the participant answered: *"That's very important, actually. Not only for me, but for the whole system, education system"* (Participant 5). Earlier he noted that students are *"like a product. So every product has to achieve to the quality, to that kind of quality level"*. Another participant shared a similar view: *"I think that's the final standards, is really important, is equal to everyone, (...) Although we, our basis is not so good, but we work hard and meet the same requirements or demands"* (Participant 4). A third participant noted that in class, teachers *"start to realize that, the difference between Chinese students and Dutch student. Because the Chinese here getting more and more"* (Participant 8).

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

Due to the large cultural differences between Western and Asian educational environments, adjustment is thought to be particularly challenging for this group of international students (Wang & Hannes, 2013). The importance of adjustment of foreign students to the host university is a critical issue (Janjua et al., 2011). As a result, challenges that this particular group of international students face should be reduced to a minimum. To ensure successful academic adjustment, the university has to draw on students' experience.

It became clear from the in-depth interviews that cultural differences between the educational environments of China and the Netherlands impact learning and teaching. For some students, these cultural dimensions can be barriers. Firstly, there is a large power difference in China. Students are expected to respect their teachers and there is minimal interaction between teachers and students. In contrast, interaction with teachers in the Netherlands is informal of nature: teachers and students treat each other as equals and call each other on a first name basis. Secondly, it is not common practice in China for students to speak up in class, while students in the Netherlands have to be active in lectures. Another example can be seen in team work: China teammates will not criticize each other and will tend to avoid conflicts, while Dutch students will openly express criticism. Thirdly, it became clear from the interviews that the nature of education in China is very competitive. Since not everyone can get into college, entrance requirements are high. On a side note, it is easier to graduate in China, even if you don't perform well. While in the Netherlands one keeps excellence to oneself, none of the participants encountered problems when adjusting to this feminine education environment. Finally, China is a country with strong uncertainty avoidance. Learning situations are structured, timetables are strict, and projects are detailed. This is because the main focus of education in China is on preparing for entrance exams. The transition from this strong uncertainty avoidance to the academic environment was challenging for a number of participants. Since teachers in China hand knowledge to students, students often lack creativity or critical thinking.

Language barriers are the most significant barriers that Chinese students have to overcome when adjusting to the academic environment of the University of Groningen. Especially in the beginning, English tends to be really challenging for Chinese students. The English proficiency of Chinese students is, compared to other students, often quite low at the very start of their studies. However, their English skills improve a lot during their stay in the Netherlands and when they finally finish

their studies, in general, their English proficiency is comparable to other students. The quality of English education in China, the lack of an 'English environment' in China, and the large differences between the English and Chinese language are three explanations. Most of the participants feel like their English education in China did not prepare them well enough to study at the University of Groningen. Finally, Dutch and English are quite similar languages, while Chinese and English are totally different. Reading course materials and attending courses in English can be challenging for some Chinese students, while others are already used to using textbooks written in English during their education in China. Participating in class discussions and presenting in English were difficult for them, especially at the beginning. Writing in academic English is the most serious issue during the process of academic adjustment.

5.1 Limitations of this research

In this research, the characteristics of cultures of education were generalized on a national level. However, it is important to keep in mind that China, just like the Netherlands, is a diverse country and that there are also significant differences within both countries. Secondly, since the collected data are student subjective interviews, no generalizations can be made based on them. Also, China is a country going through a transition. Circumstances are rapidly changing and the educational system is no exception. As a consequence, Chinese students who will apply to the University of Groningen in coming years may experience other academic transitional issues and barriers than any of the participants in this research. Finally, since all interviews were conducted in English and not in the participants' mother tongue, some of the participants may not have been able to fully express themselves.

5.2 Practical implications and recommendations for future research

This research gives new insights in which academic transitional issues Chinese students face when adjusting to the academic environment of the University of Groningen. To ensure successful academic adjustment, the university has to draw on students' experience. The University of Groningen can use these insights to support international students and manage their academic adjustment more efficiently.

Since the focus of this research was on academic transitional issues only, future studies could examine personal and social adjustment issues of Chinese students at the University to Groningen, to reveal a complete picture of Chinese students' experiences when adjusting to the academic environment of the University of Groningen.

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APPENDIX A

Interview guide for Chinese students

Opening questions

- How old are you?
- Where did you live in China (city/province/autonomous region/municipality)?
- In which study programme are you enrolled?
- When did you come to Groningen?
- Before you came to Groningen, what was the last education you had?

Questions about the cultures of education

- How would you describe the culture of education in China?
 - If you compare the position of teachers with the position of students in China and look at the way the two groups interact, would you say there is a huge power difference? Can you give any examples?
 - Would you say the culture of China is collectivistic or individualistic (do students act in the interest of a group, for example family, or mainly for themselves). Can you give any examples?
 - Would you say education in China is characterized by competition and takes the best students as the norm or would you say the average student is the norm and that all students are included? Can you give any examples?
 - Would you say learning situations in China are structured with precise goals or would you say learning situations are open-ended and goals are broadly defined? Can you give examples?

Probe for comparing:

- Would you say the situation in the Netherlands is different?
- What is, according to you, the most important difference when you compare the culture of education in China to the culture of education in the Netherlands? Can you give an example of this?
- Would you say these cultural differences were barriers when adjusting to the academic environment of the University of Groningen?

Questions about other academic transitional issues

What are your thoughts on your study programme?

- Overall, do you like the programme? Can you give examples of things you like and things you don't like?
- Can you tell something about the quality and variety of courses?
- Do you find it easy to read information provided by the University, for example study guides or instructions on how to choose courses?

- What are your thoughts on doing scientific research at the University of Groningen?

- Do you participate in extracurricular academic activities, for example attend conferences, seminars or workshops? Why (not)?
 - Do you think extracurricular academic activities are beneficial for your studies?

- What are your thoughts on studying in English?
 - Do you find it challenging to attend classes and read course materials in English? Can you give examples?
 - And what about class discussions and presenting in English?
 - Would you say writing in academic English is a problem for you? Can you give any examples?
 - When you compare your level of English to that of Dutch students, would you say there is a quality difference? Can you give examples?
 - Are you learning to speak Dutch? Do you think speaking Dutch would be an advantage? Can you give examples?

- What are your thoughts on the available academic resources, for example libraries and digital workplaces?
 - Would you say you can use the academic resources in your advantage in the same way as Dutch students can? Can you give examples?

- Would you say you manage your time well? Can you give any examples?
 - Would you like the University of Groningen to help you manage your time better? Can you motivate your answer?

Questions about academic adjustment

Do you think adjusting to the academic environment is important when it comes to achieving academic success? Can you give any examples?

Would you say your previous education prepared you well enough to study in Groningen? Can you give any examples?

Did the University of Groningen help you to adjust to the academic environment?

- Yes: Can you give any examples?
- No: Do you think the University of Groningen should help international students to adjust? Can you give any reasons?

Would you say academic staff is sensitive to your needs as an international student? Can you give any examples?

Do you feel like you are expected to handle the same academic standards as Dutch students? Do you think that is fair? Can you give any reasons?

Closing questions

Overall, what is your opinion on the University of Groningen?

Would you recommend studying at the University of Groningen to family or friends?

Do you already have plans for after your studies? Which are they?

Finally, do you have any remarks to add?

APPENDIX B

Interview guide for institutional experts

Openingsvragen

- Wat is uw functie?
- Kunt u uitleggen wat uw functie inhoudt?
 - Op welke manieren komt u in uw functie in aanraking met Chinese studenten? Hoe intensief is dit contact? Om hoeveel Chinese studenten gaat het?
- Hoelang voert u deze functie al uit?

Vragen betreffende het academische aanpassingsproces

- Is het aanpassen aan de academische omgeving volgens u van belang om academisch succesvol te kunnen worden/zijn? Kunt u hier ook voorbeelden van geven?
- Wat zijn volgens u de problemen waar Chinese studenten tegenaan lopen tijdens hun academische aanpassingsproces aan de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen? Wat is volgens u het belangrijkste probleem? Kaarten ze deze problemen ook bij u aan? Kunt u hier voorbeelden van noemen?
- Kunt u voorbeelden geven van manieren waarop de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen op deze problemen inspeelt? Kunt u enkele concrete voorbeelden noemen? En wordt hierbij ook rekening gehouden met de culturele verschillen tussen internationale studenten onderling?
- Speelt het land van herkomst volgens u een rol in de hoeveelheid en de intensiteit van de problemen? Kunt u hier voorbeelden van geven?
 - Hebben studenten uit bijv. andere Europese landen volgens u minder problemen met het academische aanpassingsproces? Kunt u hier voorbeelden van geven?
- Als u het beheersingsniveau Engels van Chinese studenten vergelijkt met die van andere studenten, is er volgens u dan sprake van een verschil? Kunt u hier voorbeelden van geven? Zijn er verschillen op te merken tussen de vlakken lezen, spreken en schrijven? Hoe zit het met academisch Engels?
- Wordt er volgens u in het bijzonder rekening gehouden met internationale studenten door medewerkers van de universiteit? Kunt u hier voorbeelden van geven?
- Worden volgens u dezelfde eisen gesteld aan internationale studenten als aan andere studenten? Kunt u voorbeelden noemen? Vindt u dit terecht?

Slotvraag

- Hebt u nog toevoegingen of vragen?