

UNDERSTANDING THE INTEGRATION OF MAINLAND CHINESE STUDENTS: *The Case of Finland*

Abstract

This study examines the integration experiences of mainland Chinese tertiary-level students in Finland, a non-Anglophone country. The article identifies four conceptual domains of integration – academic, social, economic and cultural – as central to the students' integration processes. Data for analysing the Chinese students' integration experiences were collected through semi-structured interviews ($n = 30$), and the research findings showed that both English and the host language Finnish mediated the Chinese students' integration into the host academic and social environments. Although the students initially faced challenges in their studies and daily lives, many of them managed to establish meaningful cross-cultural social contact and overcame cultural differences and language barriers to integrate into the new academic environment. The findings suggest that the maintenance of transnational ties and co-national networks can facilitate Chinese international student integration abroad, through promotion of meaningful cross-cultural contacts that contribute to the host society.

Keywords

Chinese students • Social integration • Academic integration • Cultural integration • Economic integration

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1 Introduction

Extensive research has examined the integration of refugees, labour migrants and second-generation migrants (Bevelander & Pendakur 2014; Schunck 2014). However, much less research has been conducted on the integration of international tertiary students in their new host societies. There are two potential reasons for this, the first being that international student mobility is often seen as 'temporary'. Secondly, international students constitute a 'less problematic' group of foreign arrivals and are expected to naturally integrate by themselves. However, both these assumptions no longer hold true. In relation to the former assumption of 'temporariness', international students have become a key target in the global competition for the best and the brightest. Many countries have begun introducing 'train and retain' policies to encourage their international students to stay and find a job after graduation. For instance, many European countries, including Finland and Germany, have implemented a policy that allows tertiary-level international students an extension on their residence permits after graduation, to allow for job-seeking. International students are thus no longer seen as temporary migrants, but rather, it is hoped that their stay in the host country will increase motivation for a long-term settlement; their temporary movement is

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potentially envisioned as part of a deliberate strategy for permanent migration (Tremblay 2005).

To address the latter issue of natural integration, international students may not integrate as successfully and smoothly as has been assumed. These students may experience multiple challenges in their new social and academic host environments, including establishing new friendship networks, coping with financial issues and adapting to local linguistic, cultural and pedagogical differences. Their integration experiences are directly related to the attitudinal climate prevailing in the host society, as well as the students' connections with their home countries and their families. As evidenced, the integration experiences of international students deserve more scholarly attention than has been afforded to them.

This article analyses the integration experiences of mainland Chinese tertiary-level students in Finland. While the number of Chinese students in the Finnish higher education institutions (HEIs) is relatively small compared to that in more popular destinations such as the US, the UK and Australia, this case study of Finland exemplifies the increase in Asian students seeking overseas education opportunities in non-Anglophone countries.

In the past decade, the total number of Chinese students in the European Union (EU) has soared to between 118,700 and 120,000,

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which is about six times more than it was in 2000 (Mathou & Yan 2012). While a large proportion of students are located in the UK (around 40% in total), an increasing number of students are moving to non-Anglophone EU countries, such as France, Germany, the Netherlands and Finland (GHK Consulting & Renming University 2011). Abundant research has been carried out on the integration factors and experiences of international and/or Chinese students in English-speaking countries, such as the US and the UK (Wang & Mallinckrodt 2006; Zhang 2013). However, significantly less research has focussed on non-Anglophone European countries.

There are various reasons why Chinese students have increasingly made the choice to study in non-Anglophone EU countries. Firstly, higher education in many non-Anglophone EU countries is often less commercialised compared to the HEIs in Anglophone countries, such as the UK and Australia. Second, acquiring proficiency in a second foreign language is considered a huge advantage when entering the labour market after graduation. Finally, many EU countries offer degree programmes or English-taught courses free of tuition fees or, alternatively, only charge a low tuition fees (such as Germany).¹

According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) statistics, there were around 790,850 Chinese mobile students abroad in 2015, with Finland serving as the seventh most popular destination in Europe, hosting around 2,000 Chinese students (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2016). There are four factors that may have contributed to Finland's success in attracting international students: 1) its position as one among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries with the highest proportion of tertiary education institutions that offer English-taught programmes (Valle, Normandeau & Gonzalez 2015); 2) Finland's internationally renowned quality of education and the relatively high ranking of universities there; 3) absence of tuition fees;² and 4) its government policy that allows its international graduates to remain one extra year after graduation to find a job there.³

Given the large number of Chinese students studying abroad globally, combined with the limited amount of research focussing on non-Anglophone destinations, further research in this area is evidently needed. Finland presents an interesting case study for studying Chinese student integration experiences as it holds one of the highest percentages of international students compared to other OECD countries, with Chinese students constituting as one of its largest groups among its international students (Centre for International Mobility [CIMO] 2016; Valle, Normandeau & Gonzales 2015). In the study presented here, we sought to address the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What challenges do mainland Chinese students encounter in their integration into Finnish academic and societal contexts?

RQ2: How do mainland Chinese students integrate academically, socially, culturally and economically?

In the following sections, we first present a conceptual framework for understanding international student integration. This framework highlights four conceptual domains of integration (outlined in Figure 1), based on both an extensive literature review and the findings of our fieldwork on Chinese students in Finland. Using this theoretical framework, Chinese student integration experiences are analysed from the academic, social, cultural and economic perspectives. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the main findings, looking at the contribution of this research to existing literature while acknowledging the limitations of this study.

2 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Defining Integration

Integration is significant both as a policy goal and as a widely debated research issue (Niessen & Schibel 2004). In this article, integration is seen as both a process and a goal, namely, for international students to become competent and active members of the host society. Successful integration pertains to the process or state where the international students have tapped their potential to reach their capabilities of leading a life close to or at the same level as natives. When it comes to social relations, they have established relatively robust relationships with the host community, while maintaining both their home community relationships and ethnic identities. Further, it refers to a situation where international students have attained at least a moderate level of language and possess the cultural competence to ensure their ability to thrive within their country of settlement.

2.2 Domains of Integration

Past literature has previously highlighted several indicators for successful integration. Esser (1980, 2006) distinguishes between four dimensions of integration – the cultural, structural, social and emotional processes. The cultural dimension denotes the acquisition of knowledge and skills, norms, customs, lifestyles and so on. The structural dimension refers to the position and participation of migrants in relevant spheres within the receiving society. The social dimension refers to interaction and contact with the autochthonous population and, finally, the emotional dimension concerns aspects of identity and belonging. Berry (2011) defines integration as one of the four acculturation strategies of sojourners; integration takes place when the non-dominant group has an interest in maintaining their own home culture while still participating as an integral part of the larger host society and interacting with other groups within. Theoretical models focussing on international student integration have stressed the importance of academic and social integration of students. In particular, Tinto's (1997, 1975) theory of student retention suggests that sufficient academic and social integration into university institutional communities will greatly influence students' persistence in their studies.

In scientific debate, several theoretical perspectives and conceptual axes exist, which elaborate some aspects of integration. This could potentially form a basis for empirical analysis. Considering the existing literature on Chinese students in Finland, this study and its proposed conceptual framework both rest on a four-faceted conceptualisation of the term 'integration'. Integration is considered to consist of the following conceptual domains: academic, economic, social and cultural integration.

2.2.1. Academic Integration

Many studies have addressed academic integration and its impact on student dropouts in HEIs. According to Tinto (1975, 1997), a person's academic integration can be measured based on grade performance and intellectual development during his/her studies. While international students enter university from various backgrounds and with differing motivations, their integration into the higher education system will ultimately determine their persistence or dropout. Later research has assessed the validity of Tinto's model and suggests that the students' academic integration, together with their educational objectives, predict their persistence in HEIs (Bers & Smith 1991). In addition to formal studies, informal interaction with faculty members plays a

vital role in the students' academic integration processes (Terenzini & Pascarella 1977).

2.2.2. Economic Integration

Newcomer participation in the labour market is often the most widely recognised indicator for successful economic integration. In practice, however, international graduates often find it difficult to get a job in their host countries due to a combination of factors, including lack of domestic language proficiency, lack of work experience, complicated visa extension procedures, closed professional networks or discrimination in the labour market (Shumilova & Cai 2015). Since it is not possible for international students to participate in full-time jobs while studying full time, the students' experiences in terms of internships, apprenticeships, job-seeking, part-time jobs and entrepreneurship during their studies are defined as evidence of their economic integration in this article.

2.2.3. Social Integration

It is evident that the social integration of international students facilitates their employment opportunities. This social integration refers to their social networks and involvement in local communities and may include activities in the neighbourhood, academic organisations, student organisations, leisure time clubs, voluntary organisation and so on. Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977) have developed a functional model of international student networks (Functional Model of Friendship Networks [FMFN]) by classifying their social networks into three categories: co-national networks that affirm and express the culture of origin; networks with host nationals, which facilitate academic and professional aspirations; and multinational networks for recreation purposes. Although the FMFN model by Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977) is somewhat dated, it is still often cited in literature on student migration (Hendrickson, Rosen & Aune 2011; Schartner 2015) and is largely relevant to such discussions.

Research has shown that it is relatively easy for international students to form friendship networks with 'co-national students' (Bochner, McLeod & Lin 1977; Furnham & Alibhai 1985; Hendrickson, Rosen & Aune 2011). The co-national networks play a vital role in the integration process as they may enhance the students' understanding of their new living environment, provide various supportive actions (Maundeni 2001) or attenuate the stress of adapting to new social and cultural environments (Kim 2000). However, exclusive engagement with co-nationals may in turn inhibit international students from forming friendship networks with representatives of the host society (Church 1982), prevent them from acquiring or improving their domestic language skills (Maundeni 2001) and impede intercultural learning processes (Kim 2000).

In terms of 'host-national friendships', there can be seen to be many benefits for international students developing these relationships. Past research has shown that international students report less homesickness, less loneliness and greater satisfaction, if they have more host-national friendships (Church 1982; Hendrickson, Rosen & Aune 2011).

Finally, 'multinational friendships' are found to dominate international student networks (Bochner, McLeod & Lin 1977). For students with adequate English skills, it is relatively easy to form multinational friendships with other international students, and research has shown that international students are able to easily locate their support among their international peers (Montgomery & McDowell 2009; Young & Schartner 2014). Multinational friendship can be seen as a viable, and in fact logical, alternative to the host national ties that were traditionally viewed as the single most important

factor for achieving a sense of belonging within host environments (Kashima & Loh 2006). Schartner (2015) raises the question of whose need it is to achieve integration with host nationals, or is it the HEIs' endeavour to enable 'internationalisation at home'? His research, as a whole, calls for a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of integration.

2.2.4. Cultural Integration

In recent years, it is widely acknowledged that integration is not only limited to social and economic factors, but that there is a need for a common basis of cultural⁴ knowledge to create more profound understandings of new living contexts. Language proficiency that facilitates communication with local people is a crucial factor in gaining a more profound understanding of cultural characteristics. Past literature on international student integration experiences in Anglophone countries has highlighted the importance of English language proficiency in enhancing international student integration (Spencer-Oatey *et al.* 2016; Wang *et al.* 2012). Moreover, gaining an understanding of the basic rules and norms of the host society, as well as of the cultural expectations of the host nationals, facilitates the 'cultural integration' processes of international students. However, it is difficult to identify unambiguous indicators for cultural integration since the question of what exactly constitutes the core of the society, in terms of basic values and norms, is debatable. Specifically, it can be seen that in many societies with high immigration rates, the cultural orientation of the community has become increasingly heterogeneous, multifaceted and fluid. Furthermore, each society possesses tacit cultural norms that are hidden and, thus, more difficult to perceive. Acquiring tacit cultural knowledge is an important factor in the integration process as it helps newcomers to understand the cultural expectations of the host population.

Foreign language proficiency is generally regarded as an important aspect of cultural integration. Past research has noted that proficiency in English is closely related to the academic success and overall adaptation of international students in English-speaking countries (Lewthwaite 1996). However, for the international students residing in non-Anglophone countries, the influence of host language proficiency on integration is similarly important. For instance, Akhtar & Kröner-Herwig (2015) reported the German language proficiency of international students to be negatively associated with acculturative stress. Meng, Zhu and Cao (2017) examined Chinese international students in Belgium and showed that their social and academic adaptation, social connectedness and global competence in their host society were mediated by both English ability and local language skills.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual aspects that we used to examine Chinese student integration experiences in Finland. Although the four aspects of integration are charted separately, it should be noted that they are endogenous and closely related to each other. Integration in one sphere will influence the other aspects of integration.

3 Data and Methods

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 mainland Chinese tertiary-level students in Finland from 2015 to 2016.⁵ Two main methods were used to recruit interviewees. International offices of HEIs across Finland were first approached with a request to send an invitation to all mainland Chinese students registered at their universities. Students who volunteered to participate in this research study were then contacted by the researcher, by email,

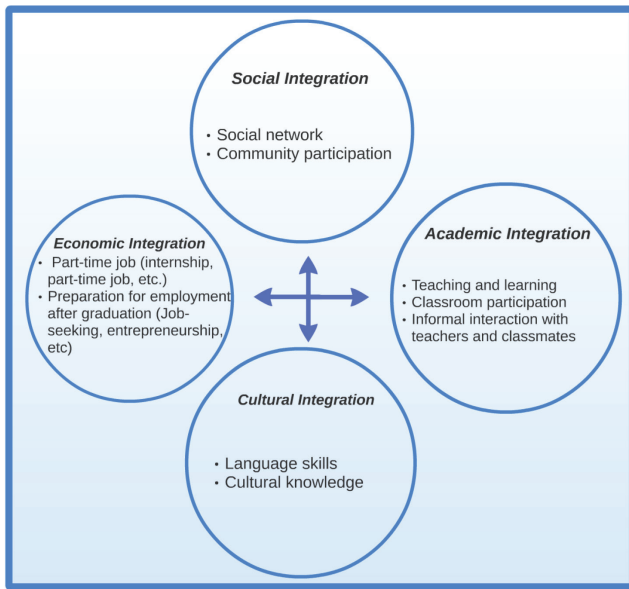


Figure 1. Conceptual Domains of International Student Integration

instant message or phone. Following this, snowball sampling was used as the research participants were encouraged to distribute the invitation letter among their friends for further participant recruitment. Permission to collect data from the research participants was provided by the Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region.⁶

This research looked at the two major types of Finnish tertiary-level study: universities and universities of applied sciences (UASs). Approximately half of the interviews were conducted in the Finnish city of Tampere, where two international universities and one UAS (polytechnic university) are situated. The remaining interviews were conducted with students from other major Finnish cities, such as Helsinki, Espoo, Turku, Joensuu and Oulu.

The group of respondents included students from a wide variety of backgrounds, in terms of gender, age, major subject, previous work and study experience, duration of residence in Finland and current location in Finland. Among the interviewees, 18 were female and 12 were male. The interviewees were studying in bachelor's, master's or doctoral programmes in various fields, including computer science, business management, engineering and so on. Two of the master-level students were working full time while carrying out their master's studies on a part-time basis.

Among the interviewees were students who had moved to Finland for one semester of study and students who had been residents in the country for >5 years. Given the diversity in the time intervals and integration phases of the participants, the authors were able to explore how different features of integration manifest in different phases. Students who had moved to Finland recently had the fresh experience of 'culture shock', while more senior students gave lively accounts about how they had managed to overcome integration problems at different stages, reflecting their development trajectories.

The interviews lasted between 1 hour and 3 hours and were conducted in mandarin Chinese by the first author. This shared language and cultural background facilitated communication between the interviewer and the interviewees (Welch & Piekkari 2006). While

a list of interview questions was used for all interviews, flexibility and spontaneity were preserved by following up on the specific issues that emerged during the interview. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and anonymised for analysis.

Data collection resulted in 30 transcripts, which were analysed through thematic content analysis, primarily by the first author. Following familiarisation with the data, thematic codes consisting of pre-existing themes were generated based on the theoretical framework and preliminary analysis of the interview transcripts. In total, the thematic analysis identified 16 themes, which were arranged into the four domains of integration: academic integration (six themes), social integration (three themes), cultural integration (three themes) and economic integration (four themes). Next, the analysis entailed line-by-line coding, structured according to the four domains and 16 themes. The unit of analysis in the coding system was one paragraph, and paragraphs could be given multiple codes. In the third analytical step, every statement in the codes was further analysed and placed under an appropriate heading or thematic 'node, along with any others which were sufficiently similar' (Hannan 2007). This inductive process generated a number of sub-themes that are presented in the following section, supported by verbatim quotations from the interviews in order to establish clear links with the raw data.

In presenting the findings, no personal data are revealed that may cause the interviewees to be recognised. The anonymity of respondents was protected by only using gender and university subject major to characterise the respondents. Citations from the interviews conducted in mandarin Chinese were translated into English by the first author.

4 Chinese Students' Integration Experiences

4.1 Academic Integration

Most of the Chinese students interviewed reported difficulties in understanding the 'content of teaching' at the beginning of their studies. Several reasons contributed to such difficulties. Firstly, the students' English skills were inadequate in meeting the study demands of their universities. Even though they had studied English for many years and had passed an English language test before moving to Finland, the students still required an adaptation period to become familiar with using English in their studies and daily lives. Secondly, the interviewees needed time to adjust to their teachers' accents. Many students reported that their teachers' accents when speaking English was quite different from the American or British accent to which they were previously accustomed to. The students thus needed some time to learn to understand their teachers' speech.

Further, differences in 'intellectual background' made it difficult for some Chinese students to understand the content of teaching when sufficient instructions were not given. Even though the students were generally studying the same subject majors as in their earlier studies in China, some of them still found it difficult to adjust to the teaching in Finland, due to differences in teaching content and methodologies. Moreover, students who were studying under bilateral agreements between Finnish and Chinese universities still found themselves entering into completely new fields when coming to Finland. The course content was not synchronised between the two universities, and the students found themselves unprepared for their studies in Finland. As the following citation indicates, this created a significant barrier to the students' academic integration.

Even though my major subject in Finland is International Business Law, most of the study material and law cases are from EU law. For a Chinese student who has little knowledge of EU law, it is very difficult to catch up with my classmates because they have a much better knowledge base than I have. (Female, International Business Law)

Besides difficulties in understanding subject content, the flexible and seemingly relaxed 'learning environments' in the Finnish higher education system posed challenges to Chinese students. In China, students are often faced with pressure from their teachers and peers to study hard. Each class has a monitor who distributes study-related information to students, helping them with both their academic and everyday lives. However, Finnish HEIs require more self-discipline. Students must direct their own studies according to their individual pace and manage their studies independently. To achieve academic success in Finland, students must be intrinsically motivated and highly disciplined. Thus, integrating within such a flexible education system can be challenging for those Chinese students who are less disciplined. One of the interviewees reflected on lessons that he had learned from his past study experiences:

Some students think the education environment in Finland is very relaxed and flexible. Actually, it is not. Teachers are all the same throughout the world. They would like their students to become better, answer all the questions correctly and make fewer mistakes. Just because the teachers may forgive your mistake, does not mean you can be lazy and not work hard. They just think it is your own business and they would not mention it. The Finnish students who grow up in this environment are aware of that. However, I realised it too late as a foreign student. (Male, Computer Science)

'Pedagogical differences' between Chinese and Finnish higher education systems also required Chinese international students to adjust their learning strategies to meet the different study requirements. The Finnish HEIs value student independence and critical thinking, while the Chinese pedagogy traditionally focusses on lectures, pushing the students' ability to memorise the material and repeat it in exams. Since the educational goals of Finnish HEIs focus on learning and understanding subject content, this is especially challenging for students who struggle to comprehend the learning material well enough to produce critical opinions based on it.

Moreover, the lack of training in 'critical thinking' and questioning caused difficulty for Chinese students when participating in classroom discussions. Having been taught for years to respect the views of authority figures, some students found that questioning and challenging peers and lecturers engendered acute discomfort (Wu 2015). There were also other reasons that contributed to the Chinese students' silence in class. For one, some students were accustomed to giving the 'right answer' to teachers' questions and mentioned that they would be reluctant to blurt out whatever comes into their mind in class. Secondly, their silence in class could also be due to their individual personality traits, such as shyness and modesty. Thirdly, the lack of sufficient language skills prohibited some students from communicating effectively in class. Finally, some students felt that they needed to have a better understanding of the content taught to be able to offer their own opinions and feedback during classroom discussions.

Even though in the beginning, it was difficult for Chinese students to question the teachers' opinions and to actively participate in

classroom discussions, many interviewees demonstrated successful transition after the initial settlement period. As the following citation shows, improved language skills and a better understanding of class content brought about more confidence when speaking in class.

I realised that as a student, it is my right to ask questions in class. A student without questions is not a good student. Slowly, the more questions that I ask in the class, the more confident I get. The teachers like me more because I have my own ideas instead of sitting there like a stone. (Female, Higher Education)

Regarding the quality of education, while some interviewees appreciated the quality of Finnish higher education, not all of them were equally satisfied with teaching in Finland. Some interviewees complained about the quality of teaching in the UASs. Moreover, there appeared to be a gap between the quality of courses taught in English and Finnish within some universities. The gap was not only seen in the variety of courses available in each language but also in the supervision and the research opportunities available to international students writing their Master's theses.

4.2 Social Integration

It became evident that many Chinese students desired cross-cultural communication and companionship during their studies abroad. However, establishing friendship networks with local people or international students is not easy, especially if the student's language skills are not fluent enough.

In contrast, establishing 'co-national social networks' seemed to be relatively easy for Chinese students. The research revealed that co-national social networks provided students with information necessary for living in their host country, as well as providing essential social and psychological support. Even those interviewees who had foreign friends mentioned that they still maintained close strong social networks with local Chinese student communities.

I have some very good Chinese friends here. They are like my family members. Some of the issues with study and relationships I would not share with my foreign friends since the cultural difference can be difficult for them to comprehend. However, I can always talk with my Chinese friends about those issues. (Female, Mechanical Engineering)

The interviewees discussed how Chinese students often supported each other in their academic work, such as when planning time schedules for their courses, discussing assignments, sharing research experiences, helping with proofreading, exchanging information about supervision and thesis writing, and so on. Chinese students also have established organisations to help one another with their academic and social lives. Many respondents had experiences of participating in the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA), an official organisation for overseas Chinese students and scholars, funded by local Chinese embassies. Across Finland, there are CSSA branches that organise various activities, such as orientation days, social events to celebrate major Chinese festivals and Chinese cultural events in association with the local Confucius Institute.

However, some respondents had noticed that engaging with only the Chinese community could be problematic for integration as it slows down the development of local language skills and reduces interaction with the local society and local culture:

Many Chinese students came here, found a Chinese student community, and stayed inside the community ever since. They want to stay in their comfort zone, but actually, it is also a vicious circle. The fundamental reason for wanting to stay in the Chinese student circle is that their English is not good enough to communicate freely. (Male, Computer Science)

In terms of multinational social networks, the importance of becoming independent and taking the initiative to socialise outside the Chinese student community was highlighted by several students during the interviews. The research also revealed that it may be difficult for students to balance between their local Chinese community social networks and their international networks. On the one hand, the students cannot completely exclude themselves from the local Chinese communities. On the other hand, they can easily become exclusively engaged with the local Chinese community if they are not proactive in socialising with host-national and international students. Several interviewees mentioned that over-engagement with the local Chinese community can be problematic not only for their integration but also for their academic development.

When I first came to Finland, I wanted to study hard and finish my Bachelor's degree so that I could apply for Master's degrees. However, in the University of Applied Sciences where I study, the other Chinese students do not go to class. They only learn make-up skills during the day, and play board games at night. They asked the new students not to go to class, because it is possible to pass the exams even though they do not study. After a while, I found my life was no different from my life before in China, since I was speaking Chinese every day. Then, I decided to stop making contact with them. (Female, Business Management)

According to the interviewees, socialising with international students was clearly beneficial for them. These students' English language skills improved and they gained knowledge about different cultures through their involvement in the international student community.

Some of the Chinese student interviewees reported difficulties in building 'social networks with Finnish students'. Several factors can be seen to contribute to such difficulties. First, all the Chinese interviewees had come to study in programmes taught in English. These programmes included very few Finnish students, which made it difficult for Chinese students to establish contact with locals. Second, while there were many references to the widespread phenomenon that 'Asians stick together' in the respondents' experiences; some of the interviewees said that the Finnish students also have closed circles and that it was difficult for outsiders to join these circles. Another important factor to consider was the Chinese students' limited Finnish language skills. While most of the interviewees agreed that Finnish language skills are essential for their integration into Finnish society, most of them did not speak Finnish fluently. Meanwhile, although most Finnish students spoke relatively fluent English, some interviewees mentioned that Finnish students were often reluctant to speak in English and preferred to speak Finnish.

However, despite the language barriers and cultural differences, many interviewees did note that they actually had some close Finnish friends. Their experiences suggest that being proactive and open-minded is of particular importance in integration. Finnish HEIs also actively contribute to international students' integration. Some universities had organised intercultural communication programmes, whereby international and Finnish students study together, promoting intercultural engagement. Additionally, one of the respondents

had taken part in the 'Friendly Family' project, where international students are paired with Finnish families.

I knew a Finnish old couple through the 'Friendly Family' programme. We were often cooking together. I told them a lot about China, including the food culture, Chinese politics, and so on. They also introduced me to many things in Finnish society that I did not know before. (Male, Computer Science)

The research findings also clearly point out that accommodation arrangements are important in facilitating the Chinese students' social integration. Living in an international student dormitory or sharing an apartment with Finnish or international students significantly improved the respondents' cross-cultural communication with other non-Chinese students. Since many of the interviewees said that they were unused to the Finnish partying and drinking culture, their roommates served as an important social bridge by giving them access to the culture in other ways.

4.3 Cultural Integration

As mentioned earlier, 'language skills', especially of the local language, are essential for the successful integration of Chinese students into the local host communities. However, most of the Chinese students in Finland are studying in English-taught programmes and, thus, it is unnecessary for them to learn Finnish. Although the majority of HEIs offer Finnish language courses, the Chinese students interviewed demonstrated that they lacked the commitment and perseverance to learn Finnish. Of all the interviewees, only one was able to speak fluent Finnish, while the others had limited proficiency. Many interviewees mentioned the difficulty of dividing their time and effort between their studies and learning a new language. They also noted that most Finnish people speak fluent English, especially in the higher education contexts. Thus, international students coming to study in Finland can adequately manage their daily lives in English, without learning Finnish. One of the doctoral students interviewed expressed the dilemma:

Since I am doing my Ph.D. in Computer Science, it is not necessary for me to learn Finnish for my research, since we communicate through English and computer programming language. However, I cannot follow the Finnish news, or even ask for directions since I do not understand the language. I am totally estranged from Finnish society. I only read the news on Chinese websites. This way, even if I lived here for a hundred years, I would still be a Chinese. If I really decided to stay in Finland, I would have to learn Finnish. (Male, Computer Science)

One of the interviewees said that she realised that the importance of learning Finnish was not just in terms of communication but also 'for learning the Finnish culture'. The Chinese students mentioned several aspects of their lives that were influenced by the Finnish culture and its values. First, they were often impressed by 'equality' in Finnish society. Some of the students said that since living in Finland, they were impressed by how Finnish people tend to treat others equally, and in return, be treated equally themselves, regardless of social status, income or profession. Second, some interviewees said that they were impressed by the Finnish people's 'sense of responsibility' and 'rigidity'. Third, Chinese students were impressed by the trust shared between people in Finland. The interviewees said that, compared to China, they had experienced greater trust from others

in many aspects of Finnish society life. Fourth, several interviewees said that their awareness of environmental protection had improved during their stay in Finland. For instance, they had learned to sort their trash and to recycle. One of the interviewees was specifically impressed by the second-hand shops in Finland and felt that it was a good way to reuse second-hand products.

Some of the interviewees also mentioned that the 'cultural differences' between Finland and China made it difficult for them to integrate. For instance, differences between China and Finland in terms of the conceived family roles had caused concern for one respondent:

There are some fundamental cultural differences between Finnish and Chinese culture. For example, the Finnish children would think the government raised them, and they would need to support themselves after they reached adulthood. Their parents also support themselves after retirement. However, as a Chinese, I will have to take care of my parents when they are old and retired. That is why the immigration policy that restricts the young immigrants from taking their parents to Finland is problematic for Chinese immigrants like me. (...) Eventually, I will have to make the choice between staying in Finland or returning home. (Male, Biochemistry)

Their responsibility, in the context of a single child, to take care of their parents was highlighted by several interviewees as one of the main reasons why they would consider returning to China in the long term. Currently, there are limited legal possibilities for the family reunion of migrants' parents. However, this may demand further research, especially as Finland seeks to attract and retain foreign (highly) skilled workers.

4.4 Economic Integration

It became evident that Chinese students with 'prior work experience' in China were better economically integrated than those students without any work experience. For those with previous work experience, coming to study in Finland meant a discontinuation of their career development in China. Thus, they often had clear career goals in mind past graduation and were constantly preparing themselves for their future careers. The language barrier was the primary reason why they could not integrate into Finnish economic life. However, some of the interviewees, especially those with subject majors in the field of computer science, believed that it was more important for them to acquire better technical skills to compete with other jobseekers, rather than trying to learn Finnish.

As a computer engineer, I can communicate with others through computer program codes. If my programming skills were not as competitive as others were, the Finnish company would still choose to hire a Finn. Because no matter how good my Finnish is, I can never be as fluent in Finnish as a native speaker can. (Male, Software Engineering)

Besides the Finland study experience, which gave the students familiarity with Finnish culture and society, many interviewees believed that their personal knowledge of the Chinese language and of China's business culture was an important asset for them when looking for work in companies that were doing business with China. Moreover, for the Chinese students who chose not to work in Finland after graduation, they felt that their gained knowledge of the Finnish and Nordic cultures would still help them in future business dealings with Finnish or Scandinavian companies.

In order to relieve the financial burden of their studies in Finland, many of the interviewees had experiences of doing 'part-time jobs'. Working in local Chinese restaurants was the most common job. Taking care of the elderly or the disabled, cleaning and working on construction sites were other jobs mentioned by some interviewees. Even though many of them admitted that working in these low-skilled jobs took up time that they should have spent on their studies, one of the interviewees believed these part-time work experiences to be helpful for his personal growth and future career development.

Some of the interviewees had set up small businesses during their studies in Finland. The most common form of 'entrepreneurship' was as an international buyer setting up an online shop on a Chinese website (such as Alibaba) to sell European products to Chinese customers, taking advantage of the lower prices of certain products in Europe. The customers usually consisted of the students' transnational friendship and kinship networks. Moreover, the students used online social media (such as Weibo or WeChat) to distribute advertisements and attract potential customers. Their families and friends in China were also involved in these processes helping them with, for instance, the distribution of their products.

5 Conclusion

While previous research on international student integration has often adopted Tinto's model of student attrition and focussed more on social and academic integration (Mannan 2007; Terenzini & Pascarella 1977), this article introduces economic and cultural integration to construct and propose a theoretical framework, supported by empirical evidence on the integration of Chinese international students in Finland.

The overall contribution of this study to existing literature is fivefold. First, one research finding is the mediating role of both English and the host language. While the existing literature has highlighted the importance of proficiency in English in enhancing international students' integration (Spencer-Oatey *et al.* 2016; Wang *et al.* 2012), this study proposes that proficiency in both English and the host culture's local language is crucial for Chinese student integration in Finland. Lack of host language proficiency may inhibit students from socialising with the host community as well as from gaining full access to opportunities and facilities both within and outside the university. For students wishing to stay in the host country after graduation, knowledge of the local language is a topical factor, while competence in English is an important facilitating factor for integration in academic environments.

Second, the findings show that the maintenance of native ethnic identity, co-national networks and transnational ties from the home country in no way limits the students' integration into academic and societal host contexts. Contrary to Kim's (2000) argument that contact and friendships with host-nationals are more important for long-term adaptation, as co-national contacts only offer short-term support, the results of this study show that the co-national networks of Chinese students provided them with essential social, psychological and academic support. Economically, many students found internships or employment opportunities in positions linked to China, where their language skills, cultural knowledge and transnational contacts promoted the professional and institutional connection with China and were highly valued.

Third, as opposed to previous research that showed international student experiences to lack meaningful host-national contacts (Schartner 2015; Young *et al.* 2013), many of the Chinese students

interviewed in this case study had managed to establish meaningful host contacts, despite cultural differences and language issues. Many of the students were willing to put in the effort to make foreign friends in order to gain increased insight into different cultures and to learn foreign languages. Nonetheless, this must be partially attributed to the fact that Chinese student communities are smaller in Finland than in Anglophone countries.

Fourth, even though most of the Chinese students had passed an English language test before arriving in Finland, some of them still struggled with English in academic settings. The pedagogical and cultural differences between the Chinese and Finnish higher education systems were problematic for many students, especially with regard to the lack of development in critical thinking within the Chinese system. Some of the interviewees said that they were afraid to question their teachers' opinions and chose not to participate in the group discussions in class. However, after an initial settlement period, most of the Chinese students interviewed had indeed managed to adapt to Western teaching and learning styles and had managed to 'find their own voice' in their academic work and in class.

Finally, this research shows that while there are distinctions between the four dimensions of integration, they are also endogenous and influential for each other. For instance, language skills serve as the foundation that 'opens doors' to other aspects of integration. Meanwhile, the students' cultural knowledge of the host society and its history contributes to better social and cultural integrations. The findings also show that while the students may be largely focussed on their academic integration due to demanding course work, it is important not to neglect social integration. Social integration will not only alleviate international students' feelings of loneliness, stress and homesickness but may also ultimately contribute to their academic integration.

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Notes

1. The Finnish higher education is free of charge for non-EU/European Economic Area (EEA) students before the autumn semester 2017.
2. As this article was being written, the Finnish government had decided to introduce tuition fees for non-EU/EEA students from August 2017 onwards.
3. After graduation, degree students may apply for a new residence permit to seek employment, pursue further studies or for family reasons.
4. The term 'culture' is conceptualized here as "acquired knowledge, learned patterns of behavior, attitudes, values, expectations, rituals and rules, and a sense of identity of history" (Webb & Read, 2000: 1).
5. This study was conducted at the University of Tampere, Finland. It was a part of the Marie Curie project TRANSMIC, coordinated by Maastricht University (<https://law.maastrichtuniversity.nl/transmic/>). The project was funded by the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme.
6. See <http://www2.uta.fi/en/research/tutkimuksen-etiikka/ethics-committee-tampere-region>.

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