

SWIMMING LIKE A FISH AND FISHING IN THE OCEAN

The role of imagination in Chinese students' choices to go abroad and the influence of Dutch Policy



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ABSTRACT

Since China's rapid economic development, the amount of Chinese students going to study abroad increased tremendously. This study focuses on why Chinese students come to study in the Netherlands, what role imagination plays in their decision-making process and how policymakers shape this imagination to their own benefit. Imagination is both personal and shared and also normative in that it determines what students should strive for and where they should obtain it. In-depth interviews were held with 9 Chinese students and 13 policymakers and a survey (N=466) was spread amongst Chinese students to support and complement the qualitative data. The Chinese students in this study were all attracted by the image that studying abroad can give them something that China cannot. Their imagination was formed by their own subjectivity, the collective imagination that the West equals quality and the marketing strategies of the policymakers that reinforced their already dominant images.

Keywords: imagination, Chinese students, Dutch policy, education, internationalization, studying abroad, overseas students

PREFACE

When I started my master degree, I had thought hard about what I wanted to research for my graduate thesis. Then I realized it would be great if I could do some research related to China and the relationship between the Netherlands and China, because my roots lie in China. Initially, I did not find an appropriate organization to do my research and I started looking for opportunities at other kinds of organizations. Time passed and I started to worry. It seemed as if every attempt I made to approach an organization failed. Through my personal network I heard about the establishment of a new expertise centre that focuses on issues related to China. I started searching their website and found out that they would start a new research project on Chinese students in the Netherlands very soon. This would be the perfect opportunity to still fulfil my desire to do a China related research. I sent them an email and asked if they were interested in a graduate research intern. In an instant, the contracts were signed and I could start my internship. The journey to this end result, a 84 pages long master thesis, was not an easy one, but a very instructive one and a wonderful experience. I really enjoyed doing the research and it left me with many other interesting topics and questions I would like to delve into in the future. Gaining so much insight in the Chinese students' experiences and interacting with this ethnic group, which I, strictly speaking also belong to, really made this journey an unforgettable one. I hope reading this work will really engage you in the lives, experiences and imaginations of Chinese students in the Netherlands. I hope it will not only be a tough, but also a pleasant reading through which you will grow the same fascination and enthusiasm for this topic as I have.

This journey would not have been possible without the help of the Leiden Asia Centre, which made my research financially possible, provided resources and made it easier for me to find the right respondents. My special thanks also goes to my dear colleague Tianmu Hong, with whom I not only had a great time, but who also appeared to be a great sparring partner that helped me with my problems and gave fresh perspectives. I would also like to thank Aad Schenk for giving me his guidance in making this a perfectly written English dissertation, my father Dik van Veldhuizen, for helping me make the beautiful cover and other friends and family for their support.

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1. INTRODUCTION

China has experienced rapid economic growth the last few decades and currently China is the number one sourcing country for international students. Education has always been an important factor in China, but the trend of Chinese parents sending their children abroad started from the late 1970's. With China opening its door to the rest of the world and relaxing its policies, more and more Chinese gained wealth that allowed them to send their child abroad. This resulted in a significant increase of Chinese students that went to study overseas. In 1978 only 860 Chinese students went abroad and in 2008 this number had increased to 179.800 (Biao & Shen, 2009). Now, every year nearly 750.000 Chinese students apply for studying abroad and 95% of these students go to the same countries: US, UK, Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, France, Germany, Netherlands, Singapore and South-Korea (Wu & Shao, 2014). The Netherlands is in this top 11 of destination countries and is doing relatively well. After the Germans, the Chinese students constitute the biggest group of international students in the Netherlands (EP Nuffic, 2016). At the same time, the Netherlands has had the ambition for years to become one of the leading knowledge economies of the world. In 2014, the Netherlands dropped from the 5th to the 8th place of most competitive economies of the world. However, in 2015 the Netherlands managed to get back in the top 5 again (Schwab & Sala-i-Martin, 2013). It still continues to be a struggle to the top and attracting international students is of high importance in this battle because international students bring knowledge, experience and social networks. Attracting Chinese students brings the additional benefits of developing diplomatic relations and creating economic opportunities with China. Moreover, Chinese students often major in disciplines in which the Netherlands has a shortage of students such as the technical fields. The Chinese students are therefore especially welcome (Pandit, 2007).

1.1. PROBLEM DESCRIPTION

It seems that studying abroad for most Chinese students does not mean going abroad to any country, but going to study in the developed world (Fong, 2011). Studying abroad is a way for them to gain a competitive advantage over their peers in the competitive Chinese market. With currently more than 3.5 billion citizens in China, Chinese students are in a race and battle for the limited number of highly paid jobs. Moreover, because of the one-child policy, parents invest a lot in their only child hoping that their child will have a nice career and will be able to take care of them in the future, in their old age. This adds to the pressure for Chinese students to perform well. What is considered to be part of the developed world is highly subjective, however, for most of the Chinese students this is the West. There is a certain

idea or imagination that the West can offer them different, more or better things than what China can offer them. For some students, abroad is linked to the idea of paradise (Fong, 2011) and this perception has a large impact on their decision to study abroad and on their choice of the country in which they wish to study abroad. This perception of the West stems from almost 200 years ago, which was the century of humiliation for China. China fought many wars with Western powers and Japan, but lost all of them. In the end, China had to pay large sums of money and make many concessions which left China semi-colonialized (Schoppa, 2000). From then on, a strong developing-developed discourse has been dominant in which China perceives itself as a developing country seeking to become developed. The government is therefore stimulating skilled Chinese citizens to go abroad to gain experience and learn, and bring that knowledge back to help China develop. There is even a name for these Chinese that went abroad and returned home. In China they refer to them as *haigui* (海龟), meaning sea turtle, because sea turtles also travel great distances over sea.

Not only is China interested in the West, but also is the West getting increasingly interested in China. China is continuously developing and has already become one of the dominant world players. China is therefore an important partner to collaborate with and Chinese students are also important to secure the Netherlands' position of the Netherlands as a knowledge country. The question here is how the Netherlands can continue to attract these Chinese students. Hansen & Thøgersen (2015) are right to raise the critical question of "what would it take for 'abroad' to lose its allure?" (p. 9). It is very Eurocentric to think that the West will always be a place that foreign students desire to go to for their study. China is also getting more advanced and the global order is changing. With China's continuous growth, it is likely that China will rise and the US hegemony will relatively decline (Beeson, 2015). Therefore, it is only realistic to consider the fact that eventually this imagination about the West being superior might vanish. Hence, it is important to research what exactly attracts Chinese students to come and study in the Netherlands.

1.2. RESEARCH QUESTION

Much research has already been done on the pull-and push factors attracting Chinese students to go abroad and on their experiences abroad. This research focuses on the same questions but from a different and broader perspective. Not only will I focus on why Chinese students choose to come to the Netherlands and what their study experiences are, but also will I focus on what the strategies are of Dutch policymakers to attract Chinese students. To answer these questions and to link them together, I will look through the lens of imagination. The main goal of this research is to gain insight in why Chinese students come to study

in the Netherlands and how imagination plays a role in their decision. On the one hand, imagination plays a role in Chinese students' decision making process and experiences abroad and on the other hand, policymakers can shape this imagination to their own benefit through marketing strategies. Certain imaginations can attract students to choose a specific study destination and this imagination is both formed by their own subjectivity and images created by external actors. Creating and promoting an attractive image of the Netherlands can therefore contribute to attracting Chinese to the Netherlands. If it is true that studying abroad is losing its allure for Chinese students, then understanding what images attract Chinese students to the Netherlands is of crucial importance. Therefore, I will conclude my dissertation with recommendations to improve the image and visibility of Dutch education institutions in the Chinese market. Another goal is to gain insight in the Chinese students' experiences in specifically the Dutch context. Most of the research has been done in Anglo-Saxon countries such as the USA and UK (Ma, 2014; Huang & Cowden, 2009; Fong, 2011; Chen & Ross, 2015). The results of this research will not only contribute greatly to the current body of literature on Chinese students that go abroad, but it also has practical worth in that the research will provide reliable information for the Dutch context. The results are therefore useful for directing future internationalization policies in Dutch education. Also, I will include all educational levels: MBO (Vocational Education Training or VET), HBO (University of Applied Sciences), WO (Research Universities) and PhD students. There is still little to nothing known about Chinese VET and HBO students, but this group might also be very interesting. VET and HBO institutions are starting to internationalize and the Chinese are getting more interested in these vocational education programs. Finally, the cooperation and coordination between Dutch educational institutions on internationalization is limited because they are operating in a competitive market. This research will gain insight in the different views on how the Netherlands should internationalize and attract more Chinese students. This can serve as a starting point for better future cooperation.

The research question for this study is: *What is the role of imagination in Chinese students' decision to choose the Netherlands as their overseas study destination and how do the strategies of Dutch policymakers shape this imagination?* This research question can be subdivided into the following sub questions:

1. What kind of imaginations do Chinese students have of studying abroad and in particular, the Netherlands?
2. What are Chinese students' experiences with Dutch life and education and does it come up to their expectations?

3. What kind of strategies do Dutch policymakers use to attract Chinese students and how do they make use of this imagination?

I mainly did qualitative research, but I combined it with a survey. In depth-interviews were held with Chinese students and policymakers and afterwards I spread a survey amongst Chinese students to verify the results of the interviews and to show a broader view than just that of the students I had interviewed. Although it is a mixed methods design, the emphasis lies on the qualitative data and the stories of the Chinese students.

1.3. LEIDEN ASIA CENTRE

The Leiden Asia Centre is the research institute at which I did my internship and it plays an important role in my research. The Leiden Asia Centre is an expertise centre that collaborates with societal partners (government, companies, expertise centres, media and civil society) to formulate and answer research questions that are relevant for the Netherlands and that involve Asia. The research is practical in the sense that the results need to be applicable and have practical value for the Dutch society (Leiden Asia Centre, 2016). There are three core themes and the project that I worked on is related to the theme “Europe and Asia” and involves researching the effect of the influx of Chinese students in the Netherlands and if there are any best practices or recommendations that can be made to better position Dutch education in the Chinese market. I worked on this project and at the same time I worked on my own dissertation for which I largely used the data that I generated for the research project. Consequently, I was also dependent on the freedom and restrictions given by the Leiden Asia Centre for my dissertation. At first, it was my intention to use exactly the same research I was doing for the Leiden Asia Centre for my own dissertation, as I thought I would be doing the research mainly by myself and being able to write my thesis was the main purpose of being an intern there. I thought this was clear on both sides, however after a month of doing research I found out there was some miscommunication on this end. There were some data owner issues if I were to use the research I was doing for the Leiden Asia Centre for my own dissertation and as I was also collaborating closely with my colleague, it also negatively influenced the criteria of doing independent research. This led to some serious brainstorm sessions and the necessary stress. However, with the inspiration of my colleague I came up with a new research question and decided to still use the same subject, but from a different perspective: imagination.

As mentioned above, I worked closely together with my colleague who is a native Chinese. We gave each other advice, discussed topics and ideas and helped each other when necessary. To me this was very important, because it helped me seeing things from different perspectives. For half a year I studied

in Nanjing and for one month in Hong Kong. During this time, I sometimes had to collaborate intensively with Chinese students and my experiences with them were often more negative than positive. Teamwork was a disaster and communication was also quite difficult because of their lack of proficiency in the English language. These experiences have probably given me a stereotypical image of Chinese students as my interactions with them were quite superficial. On the other hand, my roots are Chinese, so in other aspects I might have the tendency to see Chinese in an overly positive light. Discussing all kinds of topics with my colleague helped me counter these stereotypes and helped me understand Chinese students better. Through Leiden Asia Centre I got to know a lot of new people, was able to join several very interesting conferences, broaden my perspective and experience how it is to do scientific research outside the university context. Being part of the Leiden Asia Centre made this otherwise very lonely research process a very agreeable one. Although things did not always go very smoothly, it was a great learning experience which eventually shaped my research into what it is now.

1.4. OUTLINE

I have already introduced you to the research question, the purposes and relevance of this research. This will be followed up by an extensive theoretical framework in which I discuss the most relevant research, literature and theories for my research. This includes the reasons why Chinese students study abroad; what their experiences abroad are; theories on imagination and how it influences Chinese students' decisions to go abroad and describing the internationalization policies in the Dutch context. Next, I will explain the research design and the used methodology. Issues such as the quality criteria and ethical issues are also discussed. Fifth, I share the most important research results which are organized and written down under different themes such as imaginations of the Netherlands and abroad, imaginations versus realities, future dreams and Dutch policies. These themes are all important in answering my research question and the subsequent subquestions. In the discussion I relate the findings to the theory and finally, I will present my conclusion in which I answer the research question, give recommendations for Dutch policy and directions for further research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Here I discuss the most important literature relevant to my research. There is a lot of literature available on the topic of Chinese students going abroad and by reading through a large amount of this research and literature, I finally came up with my research question. This theoretical framework will let you make the same journey as I did in formulating and also understanding my research question, because the research question can only be properly understood when placed in the right context. The literary work that inspired me the most, is the book written by Vanessa Fong *Paradise Redefined* (2011). It is a wonderfully written piece of work about the whole trajectory that Chinese students go through when they are going abroad. Not only the topics discussed there, but also the engaging way it is written, motivated and influenced my own research and writing process. Therefore, I will often refer to Fong's book, but I will also complement and contrast her findings with other literary work. In the following I first summarize and review the research done on Chinese students that go abroad: the reasons why they go abroad, their experiences abroad and their orientation after finishing their study period. Then I elaborate further upon the concept of imagination and how it can influence us, and more specifically students that go abroad, their decisions and actions. Finally, a part is devoted to policies on internationalization and the current situation in the Netherlands.

2.1. CHINESE STUDENTS

Chinese students are different from western students because they are from a very different cultural background and received a different upbringing. *Filial piety* is a central concept in China and pertains to the reciprocal relationship between parent and child. Another difference lies in the emphasis that is put on education in Chinese tradition. In the study of Tong et al. (1985) it was found that the favourite adage of Chinese middle-school children is "genius comes from hard work and knowledge depends on accumulation". This means that innate ability is not decisive for one's achievement, but only determines the speed at which one progresses. In the end it is all about effort (Chen & Uttal, 1988). Children's education is mainly the responsibility of the parents, relatives or the close community. Accordingly, the achievement of the child is considered to be the reflection of the effort of the entire family or community. Education is therefore very important in Chinese society and parents attach great importance to high academic achievement. Linked to filial piety, "parents will sacrifice and do whatever they can within their means to ensure their child received the best education possible. In turn the child repays by overt displays of long-term love and respect, and care of his or her parents" (Bodycott, 2009, p. 351). This could also

mean choosing a study destination, major or career abroad, even though it goes against the student's own wishes (Li, 2001). However, this alone does not explain why in recent years studying abroad became so popular. It has to do both with factors that attract Chinese students to a foreign country and factors that make students want to leave China. I discuss the main push and pull factors below.

2.1.1. PUSH AND PULL FACTORS TO GO ABROAD

In 1992, China's former president Deng Xiaoping gave a speech in which he encouraged Chinese students to go abroad and bring back knowledge to help China further develop (Wang & Bao, 2015). "When our thousands of Chinese students abroad return home, you will see how China will transform itself" (Forbes, 2005). Since then, studying was not only something important to the individual or one's close community anymore, but crucial to the whole of China. The term *filial nationalism* is used to describe that studying abroad is not only to develop yourself, but to help China develop by bringing back social, cultural and economic capital (Fong, 2011). The Chinese government encouraged the Chinese students to study abroad by relaxing the strict policies and providing scholarships. The first wave of Chinese students that went abroad were mainly government-funded and postgraduates, but from 2000 on, most students were self-funded and undergraduates. According to Biao and Shen (2009) "student migration, began as a state project and evolved to become a 'societal' phenomenon" (p.516).

With China's huge population, the competition for good jobs is fierce. Every child wants to be filial, make their parents proud and take care of them when they get old. In this fight for scarce resources, a sequence in life has come into being, which Chinese have to go through. This sequence starts with achieving high performances at school, sit for the National College Entrance Exam¹ (*gaokao*) and go to university, find a good job, get married and have a child and take care of the elderly parents. This is what Hansen (2015) calls the *temporal sequence of advancing* and studying abroad has also become part of this sequence. Since China started to develop, the inequality also increased and the implementation of the one-child policy caused parents to put all their hope in their only child, burdening their child with more pressure. Studying abroad also became more affordable because all the resources could be concentrated on the only child. Additionally, there is a general belief that global is superior to local. Foreign education is often considered to be of better quality: a mediocre foreign university is better than a mediocre Chinese university. Also, because of the immense competition only 4-5% of the students taking the National

¹ The National College Entrance Examination, also known as *gaokao*, is a highly competitive examination that generally takes two days and tests several subjects. The score on this test determines whether a student can get into college and also to which colleges they can go to. As spots are limited, only the students with the highest scores are able to attend college.

College Entrance Examination make it into college and it is even more difficult to get into the prestigious Chinese universities (Chen & Uttal, 1988). Moreover, seeing peers that already went abroad and that have a higher salary leads to the last-bus sentiment and adds to the pressure to also go abroad (Liu, Elston & Zhou, 2013). For some, studying abroad is even more than just about getting a good job. “Chinese citizens in my study saw going abroad not only as a physical journey, but also as a journey from one category of personhood to another” (Fong, 2011, p. 14). Through the accumulation of social capital and gaining more knowledge about the western culture, one’s social-economic status can be improved and eventually upward mobility is possible. Other factors that attract Chinese students to go abroad are improving their English language skills, broadening their horizon and wanting to work abroad. What attracts them to a certain country or university is often related to costs, quality of education, rankings and prestige of the university, admission requirements, future immigration possibilities and employment prospects (Liu, Elston & Zhou, 2013; Hansen & Thøgersen, 2015; Kajanus, 2015; Bodycott, 2009).

However, Hansen (2015) also warns for a less rosy side of the trend of studying abroad and mentions the *temporal mode of ceaseless striving*: “This is the anxiety that, although the temporal sequence of advancing promises that mental and physiological overexertion in the present is a passing sacrifice with the goal of eventually obtaining attractive employment, it will instead prove to be a constant mode of being: a future of ceaseless urgency” (p. 53). Students are trapped in the race to the top and experience enormous pressure to always advance. Moreover, parents are willing to invest heavily in their child’s education (Fong, 2011). Although the incomes have increased, “the costs for studying abroad are 23 times the per capita annual disposable income of urban residents and 70 times that of the rural residents” (Biao & Shen, 2009, p.16). Parents scrape the money together by loaning money from relatives, friends and banks and save money by spending less money themselves, adding even more to the pressure on the students. Seen in a very different light, studying abroad can also be considered as a way for the students to escape the pressure and predetermined life trajectories (Xu, 2015; Hansen, 2015).

2.1.2. EXPERIENCES OF CHINESE STUDENTS

There does not exist one unified story of the experiences of Chinese students that went abroad. Generally, all Chinese students faced difficulties, but the extent to which these difficulties also influenced their perspective on and experience with studying abroad are very different per individual. Many of the negative and positive experiences resonate the pull and push factors to go abroad such as getting fluent in English, personal growth, learning about western culture and broadening their horizon. Fong (2011) argues that the Chinese students both gained and lost something. They gained access to ‘developed world

freedoms', but lost old freedoms such as filial piety, family and friends, and Chinese food. Hail (2015) mentions another loss and emphasizes the host country students lack of interest in internationals which leads to segregation and often misinformed and offensive views of Chinese events. This relates to the widely held prejudice that Chinese students are quiet, passive, surface learners, whereas western students are seen as outspoken deep learners. Huang & Cowden (2009) even go as far as to say that "Chinese culture is not very much valued in North America. As a matter of fact, Chinese students at North American universities can find themselves deprived of their basic rights as human beings: the right to make true friends, the right to enjoy holidays, and the right to be treated equally as members of the community, not as different 'others'" (p. 85). However, at the same time the Chinese seem to be able to create a home away from home by creating student enclaves. Chen & Ross (2015) argue that Chinese student enclaves provide crucial help to cope with a different environment and at the same time they shape the host institution. Chinese students are therefore not passive, but active creators of the campus culture. Another difficulty is the tension between what the individual wants and what the parents want. Parents often form a constraint to the decision-making of the students: students from well-off families are strongly influenced by the wishes of the parents and students from less-off families are constrained by the lack of financial support or connections (Kajanus, 2015). This tension can also be seen in the individual development versus filial nationalism and the development of the state (Thøgerson, 2015). The Chinese are quite nationalistic and as Fong (2011) puts it: "These former PRC nationals cannot forget their country, their kingdom, or the state; neither do their country and the Chinese state want to forget them" (p. 8). Moreover, according to Fong (2011) the experiences of studying abroad and the thought that the moon is rounder on the other side, became an illusion for a lot of students. Some realised that not everything is better in the West and some even regretted going abroad and returned home very soon. Others wanted to return home, but could not because they did not want to disappoint their parents and relatives who put all their money into financing their stay abroad. They also did not want to lose face and return without achieving anything, while their peers already had a wife and good jobs. During the time that they studied abroad, their peers were able to gain work experience and *guanxi*, the needed network to be able to achieve anything in China. Then there is also a group of students who became more critical to both China and the West. This group did not know anymore where they belonged and became known as the *floating population*. "I do not have strong emotional attachments to any country'. A familiar claim that conjures up the image of global elite" (Xu, 2015, p. 31). Many expressed the wish to just attain legal citizenship or a permanent resident permit in the country abroad, so that they always had a second option. However, there were also others that preferred staying abroad because they experienced a reverse

culture shock (Wu & Shao, 2014) and could not live in the circumstances of china anymore, for example because of the polluted environment.

2.1.3. STUDYING ABROAD LOSING ITS ALLURE?

Chinese students go abroad with a certain expectation: they hope to broaden their horizon, get a degree from a prestigious foreign university and end up finding a good job and a better life. However, more often they realize that the investments they made are not as rewarding as they thought. They get delayed in their study which brings higher costs and visa problems. Some even see it as a waste of their time because they have missed opportunities such as gaining work experience and building up a domestic network (Fong, 2011). Moreover, a foreign degree does not guarantee a good job anymore, but it is often seen as a minimum requirement instead of a competitive advantage (Hansen, 2015). Studying abroad does not always make a significant difference and especially for girls, they wasted their youth. Leftover-women are a new phenomenon in China and refers to single career women. They are highly-educated and often have made great economic achievements, but this is exactly why they cannot find a husband in patriarchal China (To, 2013). In the end “many transnational Chinese students ended up redefining the vision of the developed world paradise that had motivated them to study abroad (Fong, 2011, p. 220). At the same time, China is continuing to develop and is marching forward to become a dominant world player. The education quality in China will improve and the differences between foreign and Chinese universities will decrease, which might make it less attractive or less necessary for Chinese students to go abroad. Hansen & Thøgersen (2015) therefore pose the question “what would it take for ‘abroad’ to lose its allure?” (p. 9). Fong (2011) argues that for now, studying abroad is not losing its allure yet. Even though the students have negative experiences, the students themselves are the ones to reinforce the image of the developed world community. “Transnational students in my study were both the products and the producers of the global neoliberalism system. They were both consumers and promoters of discourse that portrayed developed world citizenship as the paradise toward which everyone should be striving” (Fong, 2011, p. 219).

2.2. IMAGINATION

The students go abroad because they have a certain imagination of abroad and what abroad can bring them. In this section I explain what imagination is, how it can influence our social actions, how imagination works in relation to studying abroad and what kind of images there are of the West.

2.2.1. IMAGINATION, SOCIAL IMAGINARY AND DESIRE

No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practice, a form of work (in the sense of both labour and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 31).

In this paragraph, Appadurai (1996) explains how the role of imagination has changed and what it means to the world that we are now living in. Imagination is not only reserved for the elite anymore, but has become a central aspect in common people's life. Television, radio, cinema, newspapers, internet and so on, are all sources for "self-imagining as an everyday project" (p. 4). Imagination is however not the same as fantasy. Where fantasy brings the connotation of something individual in which thoughts are separate from actions, imagination is for the masses and can bring about real social action. "The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, it is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 31). Taylor (2002) coined the term *social imaginary*, meaning "the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (p. 106). The social imaginary is something implicit and just like Appadurai, Taylor argues that it is different from social theory because it is shared by the common people in society. Moreover, the social imaginary is something that is so integrated in our lives, that it gives sense to and legitimizes our daily practices. Social imaginary is therefore normative in that it reflects a shared view on how we see life, society and what should be considered as normal. Taylor's notion of social imaginary was strongly influenced by Benedict Anderson's (1983) work on *imagined communities*. An imagined community is not a real community in the sense that the members of this community have face-to-face interaction or even know each other, but the community is imagined by the members of this community. Fong (2011) argues that the pilgrimages mentioned in Anderson's (1983) book are similar to the journey that Chinese students make. However, the Chinese students make a pilgrimage to what is part of a different social imaginary, the West as the *imagined developed world community*, in the hope to eventually gain citizenship in this community. Both Taylor's and Appadurai's conceptions of imagination

imply that it is not something static and given, but it is something that can change over time and is socially constructed (González-Vélez, 2002). To take everything together, “imaginaries are socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people’s personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices” (Salazar, 2012, p.864).

A concept that is closely related to imagination and that is very relevant to why students want to study abroad is desire. According to Collins, Sidhu, Lewis & Yeoh (2014) there are three aspects to desire. First, desire is not only what an individual desires, but it is also shaped by the social world. “We do not desire objects (overseas degree) in themselves, but rather desire to be drawn into another world expressed by that object” (p. 664). Second, desire is not separable from imagination because it is a certain imagination that makes us desire something and move into that direction. Put into different words, desire is generated through collective imaginaries and leads to certain behaviour. Third, desire is “always pregnant with transformative potential. Desire is about becoming much more than being – our desires focus on the future and motivations to escape natural, cultural, or governmental limitations on the body” (p. 665). Desire is thus also about the future and the creation of new modes of being, which studying abroad promises.

2.2.2. IMAGINATIONS OF STUDYING ABROAD

Studying abroad is fuelled by both our desires and imaginations. “It is worth noting... neither Singapore nor study itself was the initial generator of a desire to be mobile in the world. Rather, it was imaginative geographies generated through books, Hollywood films, or the internet that foregrounded the potential travel” (Collins et al., 2014, p. 667). Sun (2002) also argues that Chinese students’ decision to study abroad is mainly influenced by their imaginations and describes their journey as “the vicarious travels of millions of Chinese media consumers borne aloft by their imaginations” (p. 4). In Fong’s (2011) study “abroad” was a fundamental concept in Chinese students’ imagination and did not mean just abroad, but often represented *paradise* and referred to the *imagined developed world community* which includes the US, UK, Canada, Australia, West-Europe, Japan, South-Korea and Singapore. Abroad brought the connotation of superior over China and higher quality education. Hansen & Thøgersen (2015) mention the *imagined global education hierarchy* which rests on several pillars: tuition fees and admission requirements, rankings, domination of English language and cultural place imaginaries. All these factors separate some universities from others and contribute to the imagination of where students want to go and where not. Study abroad is also often linked to the promise of life change and therefore students are not just seeking to study abroad but to undergo profound personal change. In this imagination, media plays a very

important role because it can alter and shape the imagination of the Chinese audience. Härkönen & Devin's (2015) study showed that the imagination students have of studying abroad and what they can gain is unrealistic and flawed because of the promotions of governments and educational institutions. However, the imaginations did influence the student's experiences abroad because they were disappointed in that they could not realize their desired objectives. They also found that the imaginations of Asian students and Europeans students are quite similar. Their imaginations can be divided in behaving, learning and post-sojourn benefits. Many students did not want to meet people from their own country because they are too similar, they wanted to learn about new cultures and people and the benefits they expected after their study abroad period tended to be extremely positive. The authors therefore press for multiple imaginaries so that students have a broader view of studying abroad and can deal with the difficulties and disappointments in a better way. Pitts (2009) also shows a mismatch between the expectations and actual experiences of students abroad and demonstrates the importance of every day talk during their stay (information sharing, humour, gossip, storytelling etc.) in creating new expectations and adjustment to the new life.

2.2.3. IMAGINATIONS OF THE WEST

The picture sketched above is quite one-sided which makes it seem as if the Chinese do not have any negative images about the West. However, the image of the West is continuously evolving and as Rizvi (2006) mentions: "Imagination involves a collective social force that is not specific to time and space but is also always multiple and highly contested within particular and across communities" (p. 195). For most Chinese the West "remains a place of perpetual fascination" (Sun, 2002, p. 2) with all the positive attributions mentioned above, while others are more critical and even dislike the West. A form of discontent can be found in Occidentalism: "the dehumanizing picture of the West painted by its enemies" (Buruma & Margalit, 2005, p. 5). For some Chinese the West has the same meaning as colonialism and Buruma & Margalit (2005) argue that the negative image is more profound amongst people that consume images of the West than those who do not have any image at all. According to them, the 9/11 disaster even gave some Chinese "a feeling of deep satisfaction" (p.14) as videotapes of the accident went on sale in China. There is also the perception that American culture is not civilized and that Americans are soulless, rootless and decadent. They are good at earning money, but they lack understanding of the higher things in life. Although Buruma & Margalit's (2005) view is a bit exaggerated, a hint of truth can be found. The Chinese government discourages Chinese going abroad for their primary and secondary education because of "the loss of Chinese culture and premature exposure to unhealthy Western influence" (Sun,

2002, p. 3). Also, some Chinese that are living in America are mocking the names of some big cities. For example, Washington is called 华盛顿 (hua sheng dun) in Chinese, meaning prosperous fortress, but they changed it to 花生屯 (hua sheng tun), meaning peanut village. Moreover, the anti-American sentiment was strongly present in the students' protests against the NATO's bombings of the Chinese embassy in 1999. However, "despite repeated examples of anger directed particularly toward the U.S and Japanese governments, and despite the sometimes less than hospitable reception of the host nations, the trend of going abroad – temporarily or permanently, as students or visitors, legal and otherwise – seems unstoppable" (Sun, 2002, p. 2).

2.3. POLICIES ON INTERNATIONALIZATION

Globalization and internationalization are often seen as the same phenomenon, but Altbach & Knight (2011) point out the differences between the two. "Globalization is the context of economic and academic trends that are part of the reality of the 21st century. Internationalization includes the policies and practices undertaken by academic systems and institutions—and even individuals—to cope with the global academic environment" (p. 290). They stress that globalization is irreversible, but that internationalization has to do with choices and is often in the benefit of the developed countries and is reinforcing existing inequalities. Song (2016) also argues that there is a tendency to "elevate western knowledge and teaching methods to a position of unquestioned superiority" (p. 4), nourishing the developed-developing discourse. The developed, or particularly Anglo-Saxon countries, provide most of the higher education services and the ones that take it are often middle-income countries from Asia or South-America who cannot meet the domestic demand themselves. According to Albert & Knight (2011), "current thinking sees international higher education as a commodity to be freely traded and sees higher education as a private good, not a public responsibility" (p. 291). Financial reason is therefore one of the main reasons for internationalization. Chinese students contributed approximately \$5.9 billion to the Australian economy in 2005, which made it the fourth largest export product (Bodycott, 2009). Rizvi (2006) agrees that the neo-liberal imaginary in education - "individuals as consumers and education as a private good" (p. 200)- has become widely accepted. This has led to globally the same kind of policies and internationalization has become a key word in policymakers' discourse. Expanding existing exchange programs and new initiatives such as transnational education in the form of branch campuses and digital education such as Massive Open Online Courses are the result. Although economic factors are dominant reasons for internationalization, they are not the only reasons. Other factors are political (diplomatic

investment), academic (achieving international academic standards) and cultural or social (cultural diversity and understanding) (Qiang, 2003).

2.3.1. DUTCH POLICIES

The Netherlands is not an exception and also pushes for internationalization in higher education. It is even considered as necessary: “Internationalization is an essential step if the Netherlands is to continue to develop as a knowledge country and boost its innovative strength and competitiveness. If we wish to remain in the vanguard of knowledge transfer, development and application, we have no choice but to play an active role in global knowledge networks (VSNU & Vereniging Hogescholen, 2014, p. 6). However, attracting the desired top students is not easy as there is a fierce war for talent. Countries and institutions need to implement targeted recruitment strategies to make themselves more visible and attractive than their competitors. China is becoming more powerful, both political and economic, and is currently the biggest sourcing country of international students which makes it a very interesting partner to collaborate with (Wu & Shao, 2015). Not surprisingly, the Netherlands has made China one of the priority source countries and has established a recruitment office in Beijing (EP Nuffic, 2012). The amount of international students in the Netherlands increased from 31.818 in 2006 to 57.666 in 2013 of which the Germans consistently formed the biggest international group, followed by the Chinese. In 2014-2015 there were 6642 Chinese students, which was 8,9% of the total number of international students (EP Nuffic, 2016). Economy & Business studies are the most popular, followed by Engineering and Agricultural & Environmental studies (VSNU, 2016). On the level of Research Universities and HBO, the Netherlands is already quite international. Curriculums are designed in English, the amount of exchange programs and joint/double degree programs are increasing and the University of Groningen has even started its own branch campus in China. However, on the VET level there are still many legal obstacles. It is difficult for the students to obtain a visa and VET is not completely internationally recognised yet, which makes finding a job with a VET degree in many foreign countries difficult. Therefore, the inbound mobility of international VET students is extremely small. However, there are initiatives and pilots to welcome foreign VET students to the Netherlands (Ministry OCW, 2014).

On the national level, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has set several strategies as guidelines to recruit more international students. The general aim is to improve the quality of Dutch higher education and rank high in top-100 lists to become more visible and attractive. Another important aspect in attracting foreign students is the marketing strategy. Erevelles, Horton & Fukawa (2007) suggest that we moved from a knowledge economy to the age of imagination. The authors argue that knowledge is

increasingly commoditized and therefore it is not just the knowledge that is crucial to success, but the creation and application of that knowledge. Härkönen & Devion (2015) add: “sociality is not just based on the modern ideal of reason but also on imagination” (p.44). Marketing is therefore the solution because through shaping the imagination of the students, educational institutions can position and differentiate themselves from others. The Netherlands has also realized this and the VSNU (Association of Research Universities) and the Vereniging Hogescholen (Association of Universities of Applied Sciences) have come up with a national branding strategy. For this they identified seven unique selling points of the Netherlands which should be actively promoted: (1) wide range of study programmes (2) Netherlands as knowledge country (3) close cooperation between higher education institutions and industry (4) English-taught study programmes (5) level playing field (6) open and free teaching and research culture (7) study programmes that focus on global challenges, and which can also train the middle tiers of the workforce (VSNU & Vereniging Hogescholen, 2014). Although they have set the guidelines, individual education institutions are free to decide and make their own policies. To facilitate the institutions in promoting these points, the VSNU and Vereniging Hogescholen have even created a branding toolkit in which they brought the unique selling points down to open-minded, international and connected. They also emphasize the importance of joint branding and state that “joint branding is the key condition for positioning Nederland kennisland (Netherlands, knowledge country) as having an international point of difference, as being the place to be” (p. 35).

2.4. CONCLUSION

Chinese students are a special group of students because they come from a different cultural background and socio-political context. Their main reasons to go abroad are fuelled by the pressure from the highly competitive domestic market and the idea that the West is superior. They want to be part of the imagined developed world community and their parents are not afraid to invest in it. However, the experiences abroad are mixed. They gained and lost something. Some experienced a culture shock and do not want to return to China, others were disappointed and redefined their imagination of abroad, while others became part of what is known as the floating population. It is fair to wonder if there will come a time in which studying abroad will lose its allure. This allure is based on the perception that students can change their life for the better, but China is rapidly developing and the investments made to study abroad do not always pay off. The imagination of abroad does not only influence where the students go, but also how they perceive their actual experiences abroad. Universities are in a war for talent and internationalization is often seen as a necessity to stay competitive. They can shape the students’ imagination through their

marketing and branding strategies and attract them to come to their institution. However, some argue that overly positive images are created which influence the actual experiences of the students negatively and leaves the students disappointed.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. OPERATIONALIZATION

The research question is: *What is the role of imagination in Chinese students' decision to choose the Netherlands as their overseas study destination and how do the strategies of Dutch policymakers shape this imagination?* In this research a Chinese student is defined as a student raised and born in mainland China, with the intention to study in the Netherlands for at least 3 months and attending school on VET, HBO, bachelor (Research University), Master (Research University) or PhD level. The decision to include students from all different education levels was mainly motivated by the research purpose of the project I was working on for the Leiden Asia Centre. The idea was that including a broad range of students combined with a widespread survey, makes it eventually possible to discern differences or similarities amongst the students from different education levels, which is interesting for policy purposes. Looking back, for my own research it might have been better to narrow the target group down to students from only one educational background to have a more homogeneous group. However, even between students from the same educational background there are tremendous differences. Also, as my main purpose is to explore and not to validate, I think it is also valuable and enriching to have different students from different backgrounds. The minimum stay of three months is based on the maximum time that Chinese VET students can stay in the Netherlands and to exclude students that are just coming for a summer school, as they are a very different type of student. Dutch policymakers are considered to be anyone that works for an education or government institution whose work is related to the internationalization of the Dutch (higher) education and China. How I see imagination is based on the concepts given by Appadurai (1996) and Taylor (2002) as mentioned in the literature review. This comes down to Salazar's (2012) definition: "imaginaries are socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people's personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices" (p. 864).

3.2. RESEARCH DESIGN

This research is mainly explorative and descriptive of nature. Little research has been done on the same topic, especially, specifically on Chinese students in the Netherlands. The research topic is therefore quite novel and the main goal of this research is to really engage the reader in the world of imagination of the students and to show the importance of imagination in attracting Chinese students to a certain study destination. The research topic and the attempt to write the results down in an anthropological manner

are inspired by Vanessa Fong's book *Paradise Redefined* (2011). The book left a deep impression on me and motivated me to do research not just for the sake of doing research, but research that readers enjoy reading and that leaves a deep impression just like Fong's book left a deep impression on me. Also, as Mills (1959) states: "To write is to raise a claim for the attention of readers" (p. 10). So while writing, I tried to take the audience into account. As a novice in doing research I can only aspire to bring about the same results as Fong did, but the first step in doing so is to do qualitative research. Imagination is a concept that is hard to cover with only quantitative research because it is really personal and subjective. To really show the stories of the students as an insider and to understand what the policymakers are really thinking, in-depth interviews are necessary. The main results are therefore acquired through interviews. The second step I took is to make use of the students' own imagination and creativity through the use of a fish metaphor, which I will further elaborate on below. Next to the results from the interviews, I complement the findings of the Chinese students with the results from a survey which I discuss in a separate section. The survey was part of the research project for the Leiden Asia Centre. However, I added some open questions which were relevant to my research. Although the data from the interviews were already very rich, having gathered the data from the survey already, I believe it would be a pity to not include the findings in this thesis. A mixed methods design in which both qualitative and quantitative research is done can combine the strengths of both research methods and complement their weaknesses. In-depth interviews show rich data, but it is also time costly which makes doing many interviews difficult. To strengthen the scientific validation of the results from the interviews, the survey can show whether the results belong to a unique individual or that it can be generalized to a larger group. It also shows a broader range of perspectives than the few Chinese students I have interviewed. The research was very flexible and cyclical in the sense that everything I did and when I did it depended on the process of the research and what was most relevant or appropriate at the time. There was not a specific order, but everything - literature research, data collection, analysis of the data and developing the research question - was done throughout the whole research process. However, my research was not purely inductive, but I made use of a combination between *Grounded Theory* and *Deductive Qualitative Analysis* (Gilgun, 2014). Although the research process was cyclical, initially I started with literature research on Chinese students and current Dutch policies. Based on this I determined the direction of my research and used sensitizing concepts to develop the topic lists for both the Chinese students (Appendix 1) and policymakers (Appendix 2). At the same time, the interviews were semi-structured which left enough space to let the findings emerge from the data. Based on the results from the interviews I designed the survey together with my colleague.

3.3. METHODS

The main method I used is doing qualitative interviews, however I supplemented this with a survey, secondary data and document analysis.

3.3.1. SECONDARY DATA & DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

To give my research direction, literature research was necessary. Through this research I came across many China related articles, and not specifically to Chinese students abroad, which broadened my understanding of China in many ways. Also, as someone who was already interested in China before I started my research, I had absorbed a lot of information about China already and continued to do so during my research process out of personal interest. I watched documentaries such as “Are our kids tough enough?” which displayed the difference education systems between the UK and China and “Langs de Oevers van de Yangze” which showed the life of Chinese citizens from different perspectives. I also read articles from both western and Chinese newspapers and followed what was trending in China. Furthermore, for my research at the Leiden Asia Centre I have analysed many policy papers about Dutch internationalization ambitions and strategies, which enabled me to put the wish to attract Chinese students to the Netherlands and the current strategies in a better context. Lastly, the Leiden Asia Centre is doing different research projects of which two are very relevant to my topic. They organized a conference on Chinese tourists in the Netherlands, which is also about how to promote the Netherlands to attract Chinese and what kind of media images there are of the Netherlands in China. Although it is about tourists, it showed many interesting perspectives and helped me see my own research from a different angle.

3.3.2. INTERVIEWS

I interviewed a total of 9 Chinese students and 13 policymakers from 10 different educational institutions. I met the Chinese students in a café and for the interviews with the policymakers I mainly went to their office or we skyped interviews because the travelling distance was too far. Sometimes my colleague from the Leiden Asia Centre accompanied me and we did the interview together. All the interviews were done in English because I am not fluent enough in Chinese to do the interviews in Chinese and my colleague is not fluent enough in Dutch to really understand the content of the interviews I did. For the policymakers English was not an issue at all, but for the Chinese students we chose students of whom we thought their English language level was sufficient and who themselves also indicated that doing an interview in English would not be a problem. This could lead to a certain type of respondent, students that are more outgoing

and fluent in English, but this issue was unavoidable as using translators and translations also bring its own problems. The participants were therefore not randomly chosen, but selected through purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Both the Chinese students and the policymakers needed to meet some specific requirements (educational level or specific institution) and reaching the target population was not always easy, which made random sampling impossible. The Chinese students and policymakers I interviewed were mostly reached through my personal network or the network of that network. Three of the Chinese students I interviewed, I knew personally and this has probably influenced the research. On the one hand, this might have negatively influenced the information I got from the interviews because some things seem to be obvious and therefore not relevant to be made explicit, on the other hand, because of the personal connection the students probably felt more comfortable to speak about their experiences even if it was about less pleasant things such as discrimination. Many of the policymakers were somehow involved with the Leiden Asia Centre and others were chosen mainly based on recommendations from others, because not everybody knows something about Chinese students in the Netherlands. The respondents for the survey were more random because we (me and my colleague) spread the survey through EP Nuffic and to all government funded VET schools, HBO and Research Universities.

The interviews were semi-structured which made sure there was a red line throughout all the interviews, but it also left room for the interviewees to tell what was important to them. Therefore, the topic lists evolved over time as new information came to the surface and I also adjusted the topic lists specifically for every policymaker as they had different functions and were from different institutions. Inspired by Arts Based Research, I wanted to stimulate the students to express their own story and give them space to do so and therefore I created a fish metaphor they could use. The Chinese have a long history and they make use of many proverbs and metaphors. One popular metaphor to describe Chinese that went abroad and returned home is sea turtle (*Hai Gui*, 海龟). The first wave of sea turtles returned home as early as the 19th century and the fifth and last wave in 1978 (Economist, 2013). The last wave of sea turtles returned home over 35 years ago, so the metaphor is very outdated. Instead, together with my Chinese colleague we came up with a new metaphor: a fish in the sea. Chinese students can be regarded as fish that swim through the ocean towards their destination. Therefore, I concluded every interview with the question what kind of fish the student would be and what kind of story they would tell. There are many ways to interpret this metaphor, both positive and negative, and that is why I think this metaphor is suitable to describe their experiences. When the question appeared to be very sudden, made the student uncomfortable or when the student lacked inspiration, I showed them four different pictures

of fishes. Then I asked them to which picture they feel most related to and why. This made the students feel more at ease and stimulated their creativity. The pictures can be found in Appendix 3. I carefully selected the pictures, so they can represent a wide range of different scenarios. The stories that the students came up with, are not only interesting to read, but also contribute to making their experiences more vivid and therefore more understandable to outsiders. I also asked this question to most of the policymakers which showed with what kind of perspective they look at the Chinese students. Finally, I recorded, transcribed and analysed all the interviews through the process of open, axial and selective coding (Boeije, 2010) using the program NVivo.

3.3.3. SURVEY

A sequential exploratory design is used (QUAL→quan) in which I first conducted the interviews and developed a survey afterwards (Boeije, 2010). Where qualitative interviews were used to explore and discover topics, the survey was used to validate these topics and gain a broader perspective by including more people. The priority lies however on the qualitative data and the survey results function more as supportive data. The survey was made with Qualtrics and designed completely in Chinese to make sure there would be as few ambiguities as possible. The goal of the survey was not to find causal relations, therefore only a descriptive analysis was done. The survey contained a total of 62 questions (Appendix 4) and can be roughly divided in: general information, preparation to study abroad, experiences abroad, plans after graduation and recommendations. The survey questions are based on the topic lists and results from the interviews, secondary data and document analysis. Prior to spreading the survey, one student from every educational level tested the survey and gave feedback about the content and remarks about possible bugs in the survey. Often, a Likert Scale was used in which 1 meant strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree. With other kinds of questions, an “other” option was added to let the students specify their choice. Although the survey was initially designed for the research project of the Leiden Asia Centre, I only used the questions that were related to my own research and added some questions such as “What were your prior impressions of the Netherlands?” and “Having experienced the Netherlands, have your first expectations about the Netherlands come true?”. Even though the response rate to surveys handed out on paper is higher, Chinese people tend to do everything online, even more so than Europeans, so we decided to spread the survey online. To stimulate the students to fill out the survey, money rewards of 50 euro were rewarded to five randomly chosen respondents.

3.4. PARTICIPANTS

3.4.1. CHINESE STUDENTS

In total I interviewed nine Chinese students (4 males, 6 females) who are from different schools and educational levels. I included one VET student, two HBO students, two bachelor students, two master students and two PhD students. Chinese VET students are very scarce in the Netherlands and the Chinese student that I interviewed had been in the Netherlands for only 8 days. This made me decide to do a follow-up interview with him after 3 months instead of searching for another VET student. Except for the VET student, all other students had the intention to finish a whole study program in the Netherlands. To understand the students better and to give some contextual information, I mention for all respondents their age, hometown and educational background (Figure 1). In this way, the heterogeneous character of the students is used in a positive way and contributes to showing different stories from an in-depth angle. The average age of the students is 23 years old and they have been in the Netherlands for 2-3 years. The interviews took an average of 95 minutes, ranging between 73 and 116 minutes. This shows the intensity of the interviews and the amount of rich data I got from the interviews is also tremendous. The survey had a total amount of 645 respondents that started the survey, of which 466 filled out the survey until the last question. The demographics are quite similar to the Chinese students I have interviewed: average age 23/24 years old, 65% female and 35% male, the majority is coming to the Netherlands for their whole study and the average time they have been in the Netherlands is also 2-3 years.

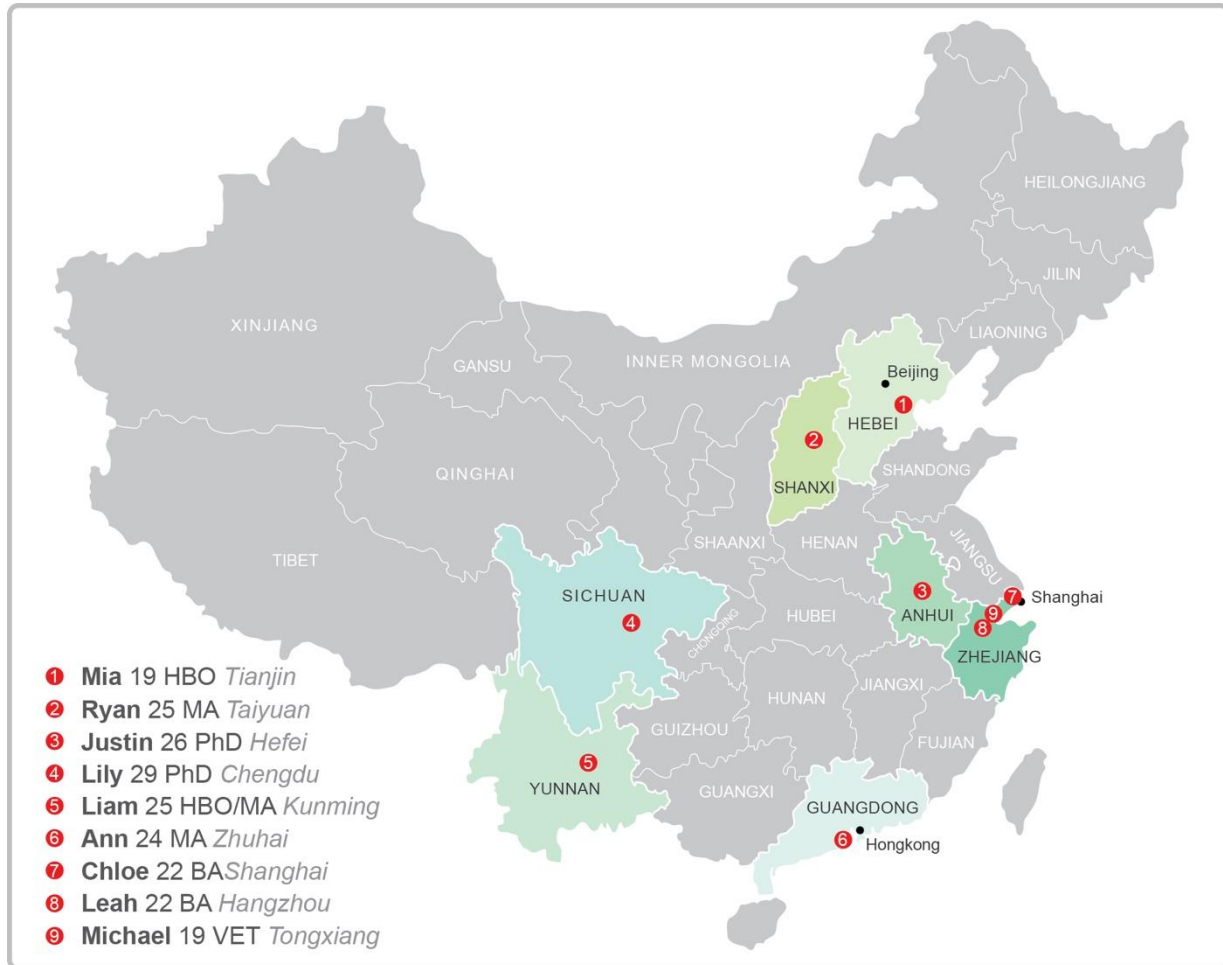


Figure 1. Demographics of the Chinese students

3.4.2. DUTCH POLICYMAKERS

In total I included people from 10 different institutions: Dutch Embassy in Beijing, Ministry of Education, EP Nuffic, VET school, HBO school, two Research Universities, VSNU, Vereniging Hogescholen and MBO raad. For some institutions there were two policymakers present because they both had different functions, but both related to internationalization and Chinese students in the Netherlands. So I have interviewed 13 policymakers in total. I included two Research Universities because more international students are enrolled there than at other educational institutions (VSNU, 2015). The listed-above includes all the most relevant institutions to the topic of internationalization and Chinese students in the Netherlands, from the somewhat lower institutional level such as schools to the higher institutional level such as government institutions (Figure 2). Interviewing all these different people gives a broad range of information and because all these institutions are directly involved with the policy on Chinese students at a different level, it is very interesting to hear their different perspectives. The functions the policymakers

have, ranged from coordinator, director, policy advisor, admissions officer to member of the advisory board (Figure 3). To guarantee that the policymakers stay anonymous, I grouped them according to the educational level they are involved with and not to the relevant institution. The interviews with the policymakers were less extensive than the interviews with the students, which is in a sense also logical because I talked less about their feelings and experiences, but more about actual policies, strategies and future directions. The average interview therefore took only 69 minutes, ranging from 36 to 91 minutes.

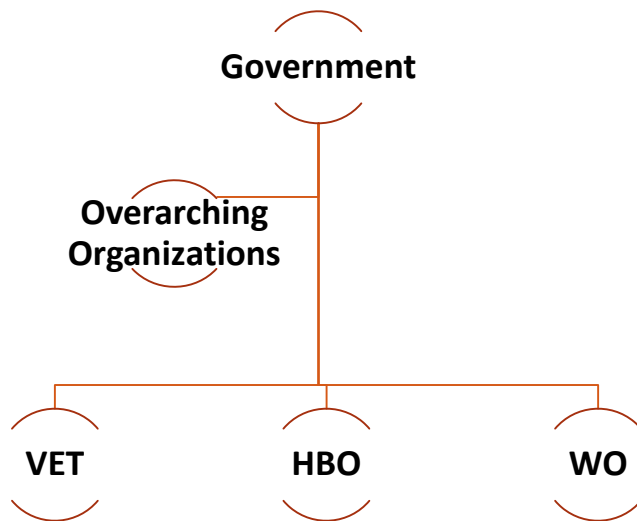


Figure 2. Dutch Institutions

General	Lars Matthijs Sophie	Education counsellor Senior policy adviser international relations Policy officer promotion
VET	Leon Thijs	Policy advisor internationalization Coordinator internationalization
HBO	Simon Eline	Policy advisor internationalization Recruitment & partnership officer
WO	Robin Johanna Jesper Valerie Wout Daniel	Director international relations China coordinator/advisor Policy advisor internationalization Admissions officer Advisory Board & professor at Chinese University Team leader education, marketing & recruitment

Figure 3. Dutch Policymakers and educational level

3.4.3. RESEARCH QUALITY

There are different quality criteria to adhere to when conducting qualitative, quantitative or mixed-methods research. As the interviews are by far the most important sources of data, I will in this section only discuss the quality criteria for qualitative research. The most important quality criterion for qualitative research is trustworthiness which can be divided into credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Shenton, 2004).

Credibility is the qualitative equivalent of internal validity. I held the interviews with the Chinese students at cafés with a relaxed atmosphere and treated them for a drink. Also, because we are of the same age and are both students, the students felt very comfortable and free to speak their minds. The interviews felt more like conversations with a friend than that of a researcher interviewing a respondent.

This enabled me to get really valuable data, sometimes also about more sensitive issues such as discrimination. However, sometimes I did notice it was difficult for the students to express themselves or find the right words in English. To make sure the students could convey everything they wanted, I let them explain it in Chinese or write a specific word down in Chinese, so I could grasp what they meant or look up the word later. This is of course not an ideal situation and therefore I also decided to write my thesis in English and not in Dutch. Otherwise there would have been three languages involved in my research. To make sure I understood everything correctly, I often summarized what the participants said and I recorded and transcribed all the interviews. Furthermore, to convey accurately what the participants really mean, I use thick descriptions and many quotes in my report.

Transferability is the extent to which the results are generalizable. This is a difficult issue in qualitative research as it is often about individual cases. However, to make the results in my research more generalizable I included the results of the survey. The Chinese students for the interviews were not chosen randomly and the results can therefore be unique or one-sided. The survey showed more nuanced results and a broader view. However, the demographic characteristics of the students I interviewed showed striking similarities with the respondents of the survey, meaning that although my sample was not random, it seems to be a good representation of the larger population.

Dependability means that if the research would be done again, similar results would show. Again this is a difficult aspect in qualitative research because the context is crucial and also the researcher's own subjectivity. As I mentioned before, my research process was very cyclical and therefore difficult to replicate. Moreover, the identity of the researcher also influences the information given in the interview. Some Chinese students even mentioned they liked talking to me because of my Asian appearance and fluency in English, which made them feel more comfortable. However, at the same time one student mentioned it would have been different if the interview was done in Chinese (even though he was fluent in English) because some things are inherent to specific languages and therefore also shape a conversation. Nevertheless, I tried to make my research process as transparent as possible by making use of a logbook, field notes and adding the topic lists to the appendix.

Confirmability refers to a sense of objectivity in that the results are as far as possible "the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher" (Shenton, 2004, p. 72). As a person with Chinese roots, I have many Chinese people in my personal network and I have been to China several times. The data and information I have, are therefore not only generated through this research, but are also the result from previous experience and knowledge. I have a clear understanding of China and Chinese students and used this together with the data from the

interviews and survey. The usage of different research methods, also known as triangulation, benefits the confirmability of the research. The downside of this is, however, that my personal experiences can create biases and prejudices. To counter this as much as possible, I tried to be reflective and I wrote down my prejudices before I started doing the research, often discussed the results and my views with my Chinese colleague and asked for the critical opinion of peers through peer-reviews.

3.4.4. ETHICAL QUESTIONS

All the participants were informed about the nature of the research and all the data is kept anonymous and confidential. Although the context (age, place of origin, education level) from which the Chinese students come is very important to understanding their story, I refer to fictitious names to assure that their information stays anonymous. For the policymakers I also only mention their fictitious name and with what educational level they are working with (as shown in figure 3) to place their quotes in a better context. It is not my intention to compare the views of the specific institutions, but just to show what their views are on different topics. Also, because the interviews could contain sensitive information and it is easier to discern who the person is, I will keep all policymakers and the respective institutions anonymous when quoting their statements and regard all of them just as policymakers. Another ethical question lies in the fact that the Chinese students are very nationalistic and do not feel comfortable when someone speaks negatively about China. One of the Chinese students that tested the survey felt offended by the survey because there were too many negative statements about China. Even though my colleague is a native Chinese and helped designing the survey and he was free to choose whether he agreed or disagreed with the statement, it left a bitter taste. Not only might this have influenced the results, but also how the student emotionally felt. After we heard this, we made changes to the survey and softened some statements.

4. RESULTS

The main research question is: *What is the role of imagination in Chinese students' decision to choose the Netherlands as their overseas study destination and how do the strategies of Dutch policymakers shape this imagination?* I discuss the main results of my research according to the subquestions mentioned in the introduction and I follow a logical sequence of all the stages that an overseas student goes through. This way I take you on a journey from the Chinese students' decision making process to choose to go abroad and come to the Netherlands to the last stage of what they plan to do after their study. Have their imaginations come true and attracted them to stay in the Netherlands, or perhaps motivated them to explore other western countries? Or are they disappointed, miss home and do they want to return to China? The second part of the results are devoted to the side of the Dutch policymakers. What kind of perception or imagination do they have of Chinese students and what are their marketing and branding strategies to brand the Netherlands and their education institutions in China?

4.1. JOURNEY ACROSS THE SEA

As explained in the methodology section, I ended all the interviews with one final question: If you would be a fish in the sea, what kind of fish would you be and what kind of story would you tell? Some students gave beautiful metaphors, whereas others had more difficulty in interpreting and using the metaphor. However, in the end all the students were able to answer this question, in their own way, and it contributed greatly to understanding their story. The answers were diverse and demonstrated individual stories, but at the same time it also showed some similarities such as feelings of competition and having to survive, feelings of curiosity and wanting to explore the foreign world, feelings of wanting to be alone and independent versus being with the other Chinese students and being adaptive to their environment. The answers to the metaphor question showed what was really in the students' heart and gave an interesting angle from which to look at their interviews. Many of the things they mentioned in the interview came together in the answer to the metaphor question. For example, Mia, a 19-year-old girl from Tianjin that has been studying in the Netherlands for almost two years at a HBO school, several times referred to sentiments of unfairness. "And also for the free travelling things, they (Dutch students) do not study, they do not come to school, but they still can travel for free. But yeah, they deserve this, this is where they are born and raised. And they have the passports, so I cannot do anything about it." So when asked what kind of fish she identifies herself with, she replied that she sees herself as a fish with only one fin. She explains: "Because the Netherlands also has a lot of people, and being around the Dutch people

who already have an advantage, I am a foreigner, I do not speak Dutch. So it is even harder for me to swim in the ocean. So I miss a fin. If I stop swimming I will just drown, so I have to keep swimming.” Something seemingly minor to her life in the Netherlands such as the unfairness sentiment, because there are many other aspects to her life here, appeared to be the common thread in how she views her experiences in the Netherlands. The added value of the used metaphor is tremendous and therefore I will start every section with a metaphor given by a Chinese student. This way I hope to really engage you and let you feel the personal stories of the Chinese students that I have interviewed.

4.1.1. IMAGINATIONS OF ABROAD AND THE NETHERLANDS

I am a boring fish, always content with what I get. However, the tide of the time draws me to the sea. I am influenced by other people, for instance one of my relatives is a cook. He used to be an expat to Indonesia. According to him, the living standard in Indonesia where he worked was worse than in China, but he still did not regret that he did go abroad, because that broadened his horizon. I am also curious about the outside world. The Netherlands has such a good environment, and people are much higher in Su Zhi (素质 inner quality). Maybe I did not swim to the sea myself. Instead I took a train to the sea, or you had better say that I went to a train station and accidentally I found a train. I took the train, which brought me here. (Michael, 19-years-old VET student from Tongxiang)

What is it exactly that leads Chinese students to choose to study abroad, and specifically come to the Netherlands? Imagination of this foreign place called abroad can play a big role in students’ decision whether to go abroad or not and where to go. In this paragraph I explore what kind of imagination Chinese students have of abroad and the Netherlands, and how that influenced their decision-making process.

4.1.1.1. WHEREVER THE ROAD LEADS ME

Michael tells that his decision to go abroad and specifically to the Netherlands was actually not a well-thought-out decision; it was more like a coincidence of events and eventually he rolled into this adventure of going abroad. He never considered doing the exchange program because of the high financial costs, however his friend persuaded him to also apply and his father said he would take care of the money. Michael is not the only one whose decision to go abroad was not something long planned beforehand. Ryan, a 25-years-old master student from Taiyuan, tells me: “Before, I did not consider it too much. I just wanted to try and if there is a scholarship, I will come. So yeah, I feel pretty blessed on this occasion”. For

Chloe, a 22-years-old bachelor student from Shanghai, it was not even a big deal. “It was pretty much a quite late decision, to come apply at the University of Amsterdam. I think I was basically catching the deadline. It was not as I planned from the first year (...) It was not a big decision for me back then, if I am coming here to study or stay in China, it was not. It was just okay”. However, it is important to mention that Chloe is from a well-off family. She is from Shanghai and both her parents are engineers. Maybe for her, the experience of studying abroad is not as foreign and exciting as it was for the other students that are from a different background and come from more rural areas.

Although their decision to study abroad was not of huge importance to them, all three were in some way attracted to the idea of studying abroad. Michael mentions that he was curious about the outside world and that he thinks the Dutch environment is better, both in terms of the outside environment and culture and people. Ryan was attracted to the Netherlands because he idolized a professor who teaches in the Netherlands. This professor is quite famous in his field of study and he compares it with a love relationship. “What I mean, think about it, it is for me like being in a relationship, like a love relationship. If you have not fallen in love with a girl before, you meet a very attractive girl it is likely that you will idolize her. This is the same for the academy, for the professor. Imagine this: in China you have read so many of his papers and his books and he is just like a star. You come here all the way because of him, so I think it is normal right?”. Ryan’s case is a special case in the sense that none of the other students mentioned a similar story, however it does demonstrate wonderfully how a certain idea or image can attract a student to come study in the Netherlands. Ryan is a student that performed well and got good grades, so his professor in China had already guaranteed him a master position at his old university. However, Ryan just wanted to try to apply for the Netherlands because of this professor he idolized and because there are, especially in his domain, more “advanced techniques and more talented professors” in the Netherlands. Chloe had very different reasons for going abroad. She wanted to “experience something different and meet more people”. When I asked her to elaborate more on this she explained: “Getting to know other cultures, because in China, actually I am not very, how to say that, I am actually not very used to Chinese culture even though I am 100% Chinese, but I think my personality, the way I interact with people and more or less, I am more in a straightforward way. I want to see Europe.” Her personality and how to interact with people did not fit with what is considered normal in China, because Chinese people are normally very polite and indirect. This attracted her to wanting to experience how it is to live in Europe and come into contact with different cultures and people.

4.1.1.2. ABROAD AS A BETTER PLACE

Other students were more motivated to go abroad and saw abroad really as a better place. For example, Liam, a 25-year-old student from Kunming who started at HBO and eventually also did his Master in the Netherlands, came to the Netherlands with the idea that the Netherlands is very advanced and that he could gain knowledge and eventually bring it back to China. “Yunnan is up to now the biggest production base of flowers and when I was still young I already know that we copy a lot of things, such as the management system like the auction system, from Holland. And I think it would be very interesting to see how the world’s leader of the horticulture industry is doing.” Also for, Ann, a 24-years-old Master student from Zhuhai, tells that “it feels like the education system and all the techniques, all the ideas abroad are better than in China”. She shares this feeling with her parents. Although her parents did not go to university and also do not know how exactly foreign education is being taught, they just think it is better and wish for their daughter to be well-educated. For her family, studying abroad is a big investment and Ann tells that this is probably the reason they moved from the North to the South of China. This way her parents could save up enough money, and although she is currently a master student and has not yet been accepted to do a PhD in the Netherlands, her parents have probably already saved up some money for her to do a PhD abroad. Choosing to which university to go, was for all students quite straightforward. If it was not part of a certain joint program, all students were looking for the top university. Chloe even says she did not really look into information about the Netherlands, the city or other information. “It did not matter where I would go, as long as it was a good university.” Lily, a 29-year-old PhD student from Chengdu, seems to know more precisely what she is seeking abroad. “Because in China the university has the fixed model in how to teach students. So you only learn without asking. The teacher will teach everything, so I want to experience different culture and study different skills.” Lily is a more outspoken girl and wanted to experience the learning environment abroad in which she can openly speak out her mind and go into discussions with her teachers.

Experiencing a different education system is for more Chinese students a reason to go abroad. Liam explains that “it (Chinese education) is adding too much stress to you, too much pressure on all the students. The only judgement on your future is the gaokao.” Chloe agrees with this statement and even goes as far as to say she did not have a life during her high school. “Because we have this so stupid college entrance exam, it is very intense, it is super important, it is probably the most important exam you need to pass in your life. So you really have to work hard on it, for three years. For three years, the best three years, you did not have a life, you had some life but... You did not have a life.” Another thing she mentions is the lack of creativity and critical thinking. Chloe uses the term robot to describe the way how they were

taught in China. “There is no creativity, or critical thinking. Like in that education system, not at all, because they train you to be a robot of doing math exercises. So that is really like a sad thing I would say.” On top of that, there are “weird courses” that Chinese universities offer, tells Leah, a 22-year-old bachelor student from Hangzhou. “Things like mind education and Marxism”. The National College Entrance Examination, or gaokao, puts immense stress on the students because it determines to which university they can go to and that is a crucial factor for finding a good job. Leah did not score very well on the gaokao test and ended up going to an average university. She chose the wrong major, because she expected it to be more theoretical but it turned out to be very practical. She also feels that maybe the quality of the university she attended is not that good. “After entering the university all the students are like, we are having party every day. Not all students, but it is very easy to get lost. It is quite easy to graduate. We do not have some requirements, we do not have here that if you do not earn 40 credits, you cannot go on to your second year. We do not have that requirement in our university.” She felt she could get better education abroad and this led her to quit her university after one year and to start over abroad.

4.1.1.3. ABROAD AS A FOREIGN AND EXCITING PLACE

“I want to go outside to see the world. I never went abroad before, I never went to Europe, so I think it is a nice way for me to go abroad and learn new things (...) and also to have opened eyes. Because if you come outside, you have more chance to contact the world. You can travel around. If you only learn the knowledge from your own country, sometimes it is not really good. You need exchange.” Lily explains that she was really looking to broaden her horizon and to explore new things. For all Chinese students I interviewed this was part of the reason to go abroad. Ann tells “I really wanted to go abroad because it is like I do not want to stay in the same place for a long time (...) it feels so good, to be in different background, different culture. Even in China moving from north to really south, so all the traditional things, all the cultures are different. It feels so interesting.” For Liam, going abroad was maybe even more novel and exciting than for the other students. He tells that his very first encounter with a foreigner was during middle school and that made him enthusiastic to go abroad. “There was one time in my residential quarter back in China, that was the first time outside the middle school I met a foreign friend, and this first conversation in English with a foreigner opens up a whole new world. Because school life in Chinese middle school is super boring and stressful and that was the first time I saw that it could be very interesting to go abroad.” Liam is from Kunming and although it is the capital city of Yunnan province, it is located in the south of China and more secluded from foreigners. Meeting a foreigner really left a deep impression on him, whereas for the other students who are from the coastal area, foreigners are probably considered

as less alien or exciting. For Liam and many others, it was more about just exploring new and exciting things, whilst for others it was also for exploring new academic related experiences. Justin is a 26-year-old PhD student from Hefei, the capital city of Anhui province. He tells the reason for him to go abroad is very simple: “It can give me a good chance to get a better position when I go back to China. It is a good way to learn to communicate with foreigners. Yes, learning western cultures is part of the reason. Another reason, when you are doing PhD research in another language, not in Chinese, you can get more information about the other systems of law. If I want to study Dutch law in China, there is no literature or material about Dutch law is limited, very limited. Also, I came to the Netherlands because I want to find some social relationship with my Dutch colleagues. Maybe in the future we can continue that kind of relation and we can have collaboration.” He looks at the foreign experience from a very different angle, from a future perspective in which his experience abroad can help him in his academic career.

4.1.1.4. THE NETHERLANDS AS FIRST CHOICE?

For some students the Netherlands was their first choice, for others money and scholarships were an issue to go to their preferred choice, whilst for others the Netherlands was their only option because it was an arranged program with their Chinese university. For Mia, the Netherlands was definitely her first choice of destination. Her aunt lives in the Netherlands and she already visited the Netherlands when she was younger. “I visited her after I graduated from my senior high school for my summer holiday and I really fell in love with this country. I do not feel like just staying in China forever, so my aunt is here and the Netherlands is really a cool country. People speak perfect English here so if I would choose, I would choose the Netherlands. There is so much freedom here and everything is organized.” When I asked her if she could elaborate on what she means with that the Netherlands is a cool country, she answered: “For example, the city Utrecht, you can see the outside of the city is really old and a lot of historical things there, but it is a city that has everything, all the technology and more functional than Chinese buildings I guess. And also the people are really open-minded, especially Amsterdam is totally a tourist city, so international, everybody just party, and Chinese people do not party that much. Just the freedom is amazing.” Although her prior image about the Netherlands was very positive, she also admits later in the interview that if it was not for her aunt that lives in the Netherlands, she would have chosen a different country. Currently, she also resides with her aunt and she gets a lot of help from her, both practically in terms of providing meals and getting adjusted to the Dutch environment and emotionally, with her personal problems.

Leah also tells that she chose the Netherlands as her first choice and although she was strongly influenced by the stories of her friends, she is the only one of her friend group that went to the Netherlands. "It seems like all of my good friends are abroad, like five or six, they are abroad (...). They kept telling me how it was different, their lives from the past. And I am kind of interested in this sort of life. My friends went all to the US, one to the UK." For some of the other Chinese students it was not common at all for their friends to study abroad, whilst for others it was more common. The amount of support or desire of the parents for their child to study abroad also differed a lot. Ann's parents wanted her to study abroad before she even thought about it and Chloe first had to have some intensive discussions with her parents before they supported her decision. However, all students indicate that finally their decision was most informed by themselves and not others. The main reason for Leah to choose the Netherlands was that the tuition fee is lower than in the US or UK and that Dutch people's English is quite good compared to other western countries. "I went to Koln once, I feel that even if they can understand what I am talking about they will tend to reply me in German. I went there last year. I did not know that before I went to the Netherlands. Because I went to an agency for the study abroad things and they told me that Dutch people speak English pretty good. And I also did some search online." These were also the main reasons for most of the other Chinese students to come to the Netherlands.

Interesting enough, all the students have roughly the same preferred study destinations, namely Anglo-Saxon countries or other countries in which the English level is high, but they also have the same view on which countries they would not like to go to. Leah was not the only student that viewed Germany as a country in which people do not speak English well and none of the students would consider going to Africa, Latin-America or even south Europe. "South part of Europe, Spain and Portugal, it is good to travel there and have some fun, but I do not want to live there (...) I think the general society, the general culture is more stable, more quiet and more peaceful here. I would say Spain is more outgoing, it is more fun, but it is not my way. So I prefer here" (Ryan). Mia adds to this "But I do not think I will choose France or Spain, because first they speak poor English maybe. And they are just very *sui yi* (随意 - do as one pleases) . I do not really like very *sui yi*, maybe if I study for art maybe I will go to Spain or France, but I am not really into that. I am more into well-organized cultures." The US has always been a popular study destination and some of the students also indicate this was an option if not for the high tuition fees. "Well, at first they (her parents) wanted me to go to America, because it feels like in America everything is on the top of the world, things like that" (Ann). On the one hand, America is seen as very advanced, while on the other hand some students also have quite negative images of America such as inequality and discrimination. Michael thinks Europe is much better than America. He has the impression that America is very chaotic, it does

not have an old culture and Chinese people often get discriminated there. He tells he got this image from movies he has watched. "English movies portray gentlemen, French movies show romance, but American movies are full of blood and violence." Lily does not have this negative image from movies only, but also from her own experiences: "I think the differences are really huge. Even bigger than in China. Yeah, a lot of homeless people on the street. You go to the public transportation, there is no rich people, no white people even. Only the Mexican people and the black people. You do not even dare to take public transportation in the night, because you never know what will happen. They just shoot you or rob you." The imaginations of the Netherlands were more neutral. When I asked the Chinese students what kind of image they had prior to coming to the Netherlands they all answered in a similar fashion: tulips, windmills, cheese, football, red light district, but also that the Netherlands is very open and international. "For me the Netherlands is really open, accepts everything. Everything here is legal. Yeah, just compared to other countries, smoking weed, prostitutes. So for me this country is more international" (Lily). Next to these images, some students also told that they were quite nervous about going abroad. "I also feel a little bit nervous about going abroad, because of the difference in culture and language. Sometimes if you talk with others, maybe you made some mistake or say something stupid, it is difficult to say the exact difference. Before I came here I know there are a lot of differences, but I do not know the differences. Yes, that made me afraid" (Justin). There were also students such as Ann and Chloe that preferred to not have any expectations to avoid having stereotypes or to prepare for the worst. Chloe mentions: "So I tried to not make any expectations, or make any image before coming here. That actually leaves more space for myself, for the experience. So I will not have any stereotype. I did not, I am too afraid to disappoint myself." And Ann tells: "I did not really expect a lot, because I knew there would be a lot of differences and I knew for the first few times I would be disappointed, so mentally I was really prepared for everything."

4.1.1.5. CONCLUSION

The students walked very different paths to eventually arrive at the same destination: The Netherlands. Some already knew from the beginning they wanted to study abroad, whereas for others it was more the result of a combination of events. They also had very different reasons for going abroad, but in the end they all were searching for something that they could only gain abroad and not in China. For some this was the image that abroad is more advanced, that they could receive better education or that it would be better for their future career. For others it was more about discovering the foreign world in which there are different people, cultures, environments and also the desire to leave China played a role for some students. To sum it up, although the Netherlands is still associated with cliché images such as tulips and

cheese, these were not the reasons that attracted the Chinese students to come to the Netherlands. There are many other countries that are considered good study destination countries, but these students specifically chose the Netherlands. The image that the Netherlands offers high-quality education for a relatively low price, and offers an open, free, advanced and English friendly environment, led most of the Chinese students to the Netherlands.

4.1.2. IMAGINATIONS VERSUS REALITIES

I would be a shark (...). Firstly, because a shark is strong and you do not need be afraid to be eaten by other fishes. You just need to be careful not to get captured by a shark fishing boat. By human beings. And also, you know sharks have two brains. Sharks do not sleep, because they have two brains. They will switch between two brains, because if it sleeps it will sink down in the deep water and gets killed by the pressure. So sharks do not sleep. And having two brains sounds like brilliant. (Ryan, 25-year-old master student from Taiyuan)

I would say I would be the kind of fish that does not really need to stay in a group (...) and also the fish that lives between the river and the sea, because I can live in the river and I can still live in the sea (...) or maybe not that individual, because I still like to stay with Chinese people because we have the same mother tongue, that is the big thing. But I mean I can still live without the Chinese group. But for some of the Chinese people here, they go out with the Chinese people and they just work with Dutch people and other international people. For me, it is like, without working I can still communicate, go out with other people than Chinese. (Ann, 24-year-old master student from Zhuhai)

In the previous section I explored what images the Chinese students had of studying abroad and what images attracted them to come to the Netherlands. In this section I elaborate upon what Chinese students' experiences are with Dutch life and education and whether it aligns with their imaginations and expectations. I talk about both the disappointments and struggles and the achievements and gains.

4.1.2.1. STRUGGLES AND FANCIFUL IMAGINATIONS

Both Ryan and Ann implicitly mention in their metaphor some struggles they are experiencing. Ryan wishes to be a shark, because that way he does not have to be afraid to be eaten by others and he can continue to work without having to sleep. Although Ryan is a capable master student, he thinks his master is "pretty fast and stressful." Especially at the beginning of his study, he had problems with following the content of the classes because everything was in English. "When I first arrived here, for myself I can only

capture 30% of what the professors are talking about. It is not only the language skills, your listening skill is not good enough, but it is also the technical words. Vocabulary you are lacking of.” English was for all the Chinese students a big barrier and many of them would also advice future Chinese students to first study English well before coming to the Netherlands. Most of the Chinese students also showed keen interest in following academic English courses, but these were often either too expensive or not covering the things they actually wanted to learn. For Ryan it was because he was too busy and had a lack of time. He actually already registered for an English course, “but the thing is, you need to get enough ECTS for your master. I talked to my supervisor and she told me if I enrol at an English course, this is why I did not choose an English course because I will spend a lot of time on it, but I will not get ECTS for my master program (...) priority lies with getting credits.” Although his English has improved greatly and he is in a better position compared to other Asians in his class, he still wishes he could improve his English level to the level of the Dutch students. He will finish his master this October and tells there has not been a student in his track that has graduated on time in July. So this also shows the difficulty of his master. An important reason for Ryan to come to the Netherlands is his professor whom he idolized. In regards to this professor he tells: “He is still my star now. He is really smart, brilliant and has good ideas. But it is just after that you start working with him, you realize how busy he is. He barely has time to correct your paper, or giving you advice on your study.” Sometimes this lack of available time has led to inconveniences for Ryan’s study progress. This could be seen as a disappointment and a broken image of a perfect professor, but as Ryan says himself, his professor is still his star. Some other students also think the workload is quite tough, whereas others think it is easier than in China. Leah thinks that in the Netherlands the pace is faster than in China, but because of ICT systems such as blackboard which enables teachers to share their slides with the students, and working groups which help the students really understand the materials, she thinks overall it is easier in the Netherlands.

Ann talks about an important paradox in her metaphor, which applies to almost all the Chinese students I interviewed. Ann is a girl that likes seeing new things and new people and not being stuck in the same place. This is an important reason for her to go abroad. However, now that she is actually abroad she finds it difficult to really integrate with the local people and stay outside of the Chinese community. Lily actually took this into account when choosing a study destination. She also got an offer from the UK and New Zealand to do a PhD there, but she did not want to go there because she thinks the Chinese community is too big there. “New Zealand is like a China town there. If you go there you will only meet Chinese so you cannot really meet the locals and also the university, it is not bad, but if you have a lot of Chinese people in the same class then (...) you will always be with Chinese people.” Chloe says she even

feels sorry for other Chinese students. “Because they pay a lot of money to come here and they only interact, they mostly interact with other Chinese here. I do not see the point in doing that.” Although all the Chinese students I interviewed see themselves as different from other Chinese students – more integrated and better English skills – I think the only students that really merged into the Dutch society are Chloe and Mia. All the other students are to a greater or lesser extent part of the Chinese community in the Netherlands and although they also have international and Dutch friends, they still feel more comfortable around other Chinese students. Lily admits: “But in general, I am more close to Chinese of course. With all the Chinese in this building. Because Chinese will know each other. For example, I come here as a new Chinese, they will ask me, hey where are you from. Because they know you are Chinese, so it is easy to talk because you can talk in Chinese. And once you know one of them, that one will introduce you to the whole group.”

4.1.2.2. IMAGINATIONS BECOMING REALITY

Although there are some things that the Chinese students did not foresee, most of their expectations and imaginations became reality. The people speak English well, the education is generally of high quality, the environment is nice and clean and the Netherlands is an open and free country. Liam describes his first impression of the Netherlands when he just arrived as follows: “The moment I reached Holland, I was grabbing my eyes and everything looks so interesting (...) we were quite amazed by the teaching facilities, like the library, like the classrooms. And how they combine the sustainability principle in the building (...). These things were our first impression. And our first impression is like, wow, this is how a developed country looks like.” Michael also tells that he was most impressed by the environment: “The most impressive memory on that day was the bright stars in the sky. In China, the haze was so terrible that you can barely see stars.” The Chinese students also experienced the open and international character of the Netherlands. Mia has a Dutch boyfriend and tells he is already international because his work is quite international, but that his friends are also open and internationally-minded. “When I talk to them they are really interested, and I make Chinese food for them, they would like to know the recipe. And they are really excited to know the different culture, even though they do not have anything international in their work. Also, Dutch people like to travel a lot. Many people I think have experienced being abroad I think.” Chloe also mentions that Dutch people are less surprised by things that would be surprising for Chinese. “Because you (me the interviewer) have an Asian face does not mean you can speak Chinese. Because everywhere I go, people talk Dutch to me. Sometimes I respond in English and then they keep talking in Dutch. I think sometimes people are not so stereotype.” Other students also mention that the Dutch are

less opinionated about certain things and that being different is more accepted in the Netherlands. For example, Mia mentions that people in China tend to look down at people that do not do university, but lower education. As a student that specifically chose to do HBO over University, she feels more comfortable in the Netherlands.

Lily was partly attracted to study abroad because of the different education system and the equal relationship between teacher and student. She certainly experienced what she was looking for: “Here you just say it, so it just makes your life simpler. I do not want to do this, it is too much for me, and I think your opinion is wrong. You just say it, and the professor will not have any problems.” Other students also experienced the straightforward character of the Dutch people, although they did not expect the way Dutch people interact to be so different. Liam tells: “We immediately felt the Dutch people are more straightforward, very straightforward. In China when we talk to someone you do not know, you can immediately feel that he or she is extremely polite, without expressing their true feelings and their true intention. People get to know each other in a slow but steady way.” Ryan adds that he feels that “socializing is much simpler here (...). I think it is pretty good, because then I do not need to guess.” Other Chinese students also expressed the same feelings, and although the way of interacting is very different, they prefer the straightforward style of interacting. A negative expectation that became reality is discrimination. Several students indicated that they had experienced racial discrimination during their stay in the Netherlands, both overt and more hidden discrimination. “Yes, almost all my friends that I know who studies abroad, they have had similar experiences (discrimination). But it rarely happens, but it happens. And when I was doing my master, food quality management, they kept on emphasizing that food quality is a problem in China, and keep on asking the Chinese students, can you remember something about that accident? Yeah, it is not actually discrimination, it is for the case study, but it still may make you feel a little uncomfortable” (Liam). However, the students explained they felt it was not that bad because it was within their expectations.

4.1.2.3. CONCLUSION

Although most of the students were looking forward to a great time abroad, they also encountered some difficulties. Many of the Chinese students chose the Netherlands because of the English environment, but many of them experienced great difficulties exactly because of the English environment. Some already expected language to be a problem, whereas others did not expect it to be a problem to this extent. Eventually all Chinese students learned to cope with this and their English level improved gradually. Immersion in Dutch society also appeared to be more difficult than the Chinese students thought. It is not

that the Chinese students did not want to integrate more, but there are some barriers, be it the Dutch, English or Chinese language, cultural differences or spatial separation, it all makes full integration more difficult. Nevertheless, in the end most of the expectations and imaginations came true and all Chinese students gained a lot. They were able to broaden their horizon, increase their knowledge and enjoy a clean, open and free environment.

4.1.3. FUTURE DREAMS

I do not know many words for fish, but I can describe it. I would like to be those kind of fish, not too weak that gets eaten by a shark. Not that strong a fish, but at least to survive for a couple of months. Not a small fish that gets eaten after one second, so bad. I would like to be fish that can swim a lot, that I can go very far, maybe to the other sea, the other ocean. But not necessarily coming back, but just like to swim a lot I guess. And also live longer. Not only a couple of months of life, but a couple of years as a fish. I think that is long enough. (Chloe, 22 years, bachelor student from Shanghai)

I think some more aggressive fish, shark? Because when I go back to China I will have a good career, so I can eat all the small fish if I want. (All the small fish are the Chinese?) Yeah, because I am kind of superior. Eat all the fish, but eating is not that eating, but just better than you, nobody will eat me. I will not have to worry about finding a job. (Was this also your purpose to go abroad?) Yeah I think so, otherwise why spend 4 years, because I have a better view and also better knowledge, better education, better background, so yeah. I think in total I will have a better life, also for my kids. For example, at least I can teach her English right? (Lily, 29 years old PhD student from Chengdu)

The last stage of the students' journey abroad involves their decision to stay in the Netherlands, explore the world or return to China. The majority of the Chinese students expresses the wish to stay abroad for a while. Chloe's metaphor illustrates this well. She would like to swim as far as possible and see as much as possible. Being a fish illustrates for her the time she is still free and can do whatever she wants. Some students will continue their study in the Netherlands, whereas others are looking for job opportunities. Some want to try to stay in the Netherlands, whereas others want to go to other European countries or America. However, almost all students eventually want to return to China. Chloe tells in her metaphor, "a couple of years as a fish. I think that is long enough", which implicates that finally her freedom as a fish will come to an end and she will have to return to China. Family ties are a major factor because many

Chinese students are only child and they see it as their duty to take care of their parents in their old age. Leah also explains it was never her intention to stay abroad her whole life. "At the beginning I know that I wish to work 2-3 years here, before I go back. But eventually I want to go back. I love the food in China and my family is there. I want to spend more time with them." Others just prefer the life in China. "My parents are there, my friends are there, yeah, I told you, it is nicer to be in China, it is more fun to be there. Here is more boring, except badminton, what can you do?" (Lily). For most students, staying abroad also functions as a resume enhancer and helps giving them better perspectives in China. Lily's metaphor shows wonderfully what she gained by studying abroad; she became a shark and she believes she will have a better life. Leah also believes that staying abroad will make it easier to find a job: "We have one-year search year; I think I will use it (...) foreign working experience is a plus when you go back to China. Nowadays many students are studying abroad, and half of them only get back with a degree, without experience. And the phenomenon is that for them it is also very hard to find a job, even though they have a foreign degree." Ryan and Mia are the only ones that want to stay abroad the rest of their lives and Ryan specifically wants to stay in the Netherlands. "For the life, I really admire the infrastructure management here. Everything is very well-organized, the traffic, the city design, just in generally and the environment is clean. I think the Netherlands is my favourite country (...). I am thinking about spending the rest of my life here" (Ryan). Mia just does not want to go back to China: "Anyway, any European country is more well-developed, and more clean and less poverty. People can have the right to speak for themselves and the government somehow is still better organized than in China."

Concluding, the Chinese students were attracted by certain images that abroad and the Netherlands imply for them. Abroad is novel and exciting and can provide better education and perhaps also a better life. The Netherlands in particular has the image of an open, free and clean environment and the average English level of the people is very high. Most of these expectations and imaginations became reality and many want to continue to stay abroad for a certain period of time. However, the great image of abroad does not persuade the students to stay abroad for the rest of their lives. Family ties and nationalistic feelings still prevail and lead the students back home. One of my Chinese friends recently returned to China after finishing his master in the Netherlands and he posted a song on Facebook which illustrates beautifully his love for his country:

Almost heaven, West Virginia, Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah River.

Life is old there, older than the trees, younger than the mountains, blowing like a breeze.

Country roads, take me home to the place I belong.

West Virginia, mountain mamma, take me home, country roads.

All my memories gather round her, miner's lady, stranger to blue water.

Dark and dusty, painted on the sky, misty taste of moonshine, teardrop in my eye.

Country roads, take me home to the place I belong.

West Virginia, mountain mamma, take me home, country roads.

I hear her voice in the morning hour, she calls me, the radio reminds me of my home far away.

And driving down the road I get a feeling that I should have been home yesterday, yesterday.

Country roads, take me home to the place I belong.

West Virginia, mountain mamma, take me home, country roads.

Country roads, take me home to the place I belong.

West Virginia, mountain mamma, take me home, country roads

Take me home now, country roads,

Take me home now, country roads.

John Denver – Take me Home, Country roads

4.2. FISHING IN THE OCEAN

Imagination is not something solely determined by the personal thoughts of the students, but it is also influenced by how the policymakers brand themselves and whether they are effective in conveying that image. It is a two-way street. On the one hand the imagination of the students is shaped by their own interpretation and thoughts, but on the other hand these thoughts are at the same time framed by the media and stories of others. The marketing and branding strategies of the Dutch policymakers are therefore important in Chinese students' imagination of abroad and the Netherlands. That is why it is interesting to see how the Netherlands brands itself, what strategies they use and whether they are effective; are the images they promote also the images Chinese students have and are these promoted images also the reason for the Chinese students to come to the Netherlands? Another interesting aspect is to see how the Dutch policymakers actually view the Chinese. Do they have any images? If so, what kind of images do they have and do they utilize these images in their marketing strategy? Just like I did with

the Chinese students, I asked most of the policymakers what kind of fish the Chinese students would be in their opinion. Sometimes there was no time left to ask this question or I felt it was not appropriate to ask, so I did not do so. However, most of the policymakers I did ask this question to, gave wonderful answers. It really shows what they think about Chinese students and what kind of attitude they have towards them. One of the policymakers even extended the metaphor: “Universities are modern fisherman, not just with an angle, a rope and a hook (...). Universities also see themselves as competitors in the Chinese market, they are all fishing in the same pond. But what they are underestimating is that they are not fishing in the same pond, they are all fishing in the same ocean” (Robin, WO).

4.2.1. WHAT KIND OF FISH ARE THEY?

When I asked the policymakers what kind of view they have of the Chinese students, almost half of them indicated that they had no clue because they do not have personal contact with the students. Robin (WO) demonstrates wonderfully: “No idea, that is what you get for working here, so far away from the students”. At first they seemed hesitant to give their opinion on this big group of students based solely on their ideas and perceptions and not on facts. However, throughout the interview they implicitly showed what kind of view they have of Chinese students. Especially when I asked them the metaphor question, their impression became very clear. Many policymakers have a very positive image of the Chinese students and the metaphors they give show some overlapping characteristics. For example, Leon (VET) describes the Chinese students as a dolphin. “I would say they are a dolphin: friendly and intelligent. From my own experience Chinese are very friendly and polite. Why intelligent? Intelligent people are everywhere so also in China. I think if I would describe Russian students, I would describe them differently than Chinese students. This has probably to do with prejudice. In the case of the Chinese, it might be a positive prejudice. Very friendly. However, I am not sure whether they can adapt easily to new circumstances. They are not like a chameleon.” Jesper (WO) also thinks the Chinese are a friendly fish, but describes them mainly as a whale shark because there are just a lot of Chinese students. This is also what Robin means with not fishing in the same pond, but ocean. Simon (HBO) argues in a similar vein: “It is a large fish, not a large fish but a school fish. Because there are a lot of Chinese students (...). When you look at other countries, China is not like Turkey, but they are self-conscious. It is like we do capacity building in China, but they are getting there, with or without our help. So it is a confident fish (...). There is a hope we will achieve in the future, that we can learn from China. It is a fish we can learn from.” However, many policymakers also mention that the Chinese students encounter a culture shock and have some difficulties adjusting to the new environment. Just like Leon says they are not like a chameleon, Eline (HBO) mentions that “they have to

adjust, it is a big culture shock (...). We had some students, but they were struggling to pass within the given time: culture, the language, the attitude..." Robin (WO) recognizes the same problem, but explains that once the Chinese students are finally adjusted to the Dutch system and way of life, they are hardworking and can even contribute to the quality of education. "But as soon as Chinese students are accustomed to this (culture shock), they are also really hard workers. This is also an added value, an extra asset, also for our national students. The way they engage in their studies, the way they work hard is also an inspiration if not somewhat competition for our national students, so that is good. It helps improving the quality of education for all." The Chinese students are really of added value and both Robin (WO) and Simon (HBO) believe they are a fish the Netherlands can learn and gain from. Robin's metaphor relates very well to this point of view. "The first thing that came to mind is the parrotfish, because it adds diversity and colour in the classroom." This fits well within the general goal of having international classrooms, in which different cultures and people are celebrated and contribute to the quality of education. Wout (WO) adds to this that Chinese students are also very pleasant to work with. "I think they are very eager to learn, very ambitious. That makes it pleasant to work with them. They really focus on increasing their knowledge and experience, and of course if you would like to share your knowledge and experience, it is pleasant to do that with somebody who is really interested in that and likes to learn."

Chinese students are mainly seen in terms of large numbers, friendly, intelligent and hardworking. However, they also tend to stick to the Chinese group and do not like to stand out. Whereas Robin (WO) describes the students as a parrotfish, a policymaker my colleague interviewed says "it's not a super colourful fish, because it does not like to stand out. They swim with the group. Also it does not like to be in the front, it rather likes to be in a group, but also not too behind, it should be within the head part." Sophie (general) agrees with this and elaborates: "I think it is a little bit like Nemo, no, the other way around: the fish is starting a little bit shy in the group, and then it has to grow, it has to learn to take more initiatives, and to learn to swim alone. From a group fish to a more individual fish". Chinese students also have difficulties blending in with other nationalities and prefer to stick to the Chinese community. "When it comes to community building they are strong enough to set up their own Chinese community, which also causes a problem, because it takes a longer time before they really mingle with the other international students" (Daniel, WO). Another impression is that the Chinese students do not really know what they want and that the parents of the Chinese students have a big influence on their decision-making. Eline (HBO) tells: "there are also many that have no idea what they are actually going to do. And that is the majority I think, but I am not sure (...). They want to go abroad, but they do not know what they actually want. For some, I am afraid it is the parents that have decided what they are going to study." She

explains that there is a high dropout rate for the Chinese students and thinks this has to do with that the students did not choose their major themselves and are therefore less motivated. Another concern is the English level of the Chinese students. This was not mentioned in the metaphors the policymakers gave, but many expressed this concern in the interview.

Although these images are quite stereotypical, there are also some policymakers that notice that the international student population is becoming more homogenous because there is a new generation of Chinese students whose English level is better and who are less timid, but more outspoken. “If I talk with professors and teachers at (a renowned Chinese) University, they are telling me that the new generation does not find it a big honour to take your classes, but expect that you serve them, and if they are not happy with the way you treat them or if they are not happy with the way you teach them, or also in terms of the academic debate, they are not afraid to say what they think. I think that is the new generation, especially with the one child policy, the children are now used to be in the centre of attention and have less difficulty in expression in what they need and want. Of course it is still different from the Dutch students, but I think it is changing very fast (...) I think it is becoming more and more homogenous, the student population” (Lars, general). Many policymakers also argue that the Chinese students are part of the international student population and special policies or adjustments for the Chinese are therefore not necessary.

4.2.2. BRANDING THE NETHERLANDS

The VSNU has, as explained in the theoretical framework, developed the branding toolkit which focuses on three unique selling points: open-minded, international and connected. This branding toolkit has been developed to have a common language in promoting Dutch education abroad and to become a unified force. However, many Dutch policymakers are actually not really aware of this branding toolkit and how the Netherlands brands itself. “I have been on the website of VSNU a few times, I see the orange and the tulips, but I do not know how they brand the Netherlands” (Johanna, WO). The branding toolkit was established in 2014, but it does not seem as if the invented common language has been widely put to use. However, when asking the different policymakers what their competitive advantage is, they all answer in a similar fashion and, surprisingly, most things are related to the branding toolkit. Most policymakers think their competitive edge has to do with a certain prestige and the international environment that the Netherlands offers. They perceive the quality of Dutch education to be high, they score high in the rankings and some have established a good tradition and name. The Netherlands also offers a lot of courses in English and it is often perceived as the “gateway to Europe”. The Netherlands is economically,

academically and also in terms of traveling deeply connected to Europe, which “provides the Chinese students more than just the Netherlands experience” (Lars, general). In terms of branding, they all have very different perspectives on which strategies and images to use. Some put the emphasis on aspects related to prestige as mentioned earlier, meaning branding related to the top-sectors such as agriculture, the quality of education and the Netherlands as “a very rich, wealthy, modern and innovative country which reflects in our education system and the quality of our education” (Lars, general). Others think the best strategy is to make use of a broader picture: first promote the Netherlands as part of Europe, then the country, then the city and finally the educational institution. Some other individual policymakers would like to stress more specific images, such as the Netherlands as the country that fought against the water or the specific approach that the educational institution employs. However, all agree that although a lot of question marks can be placed at using ranking systems, they all consider rankings to be an important and effective promotion tool. Although there are many ideas in how to present themselves in China, the policymakers all share the same view that the visibility of the Netherlands is still very small in China. “In the end if you look at the competitive edge of the Netherlands, we are still very small, we are still small in terms of awareness, how much Chinese people know about the Netherlands, about Dutch education is still very, very limited. We are not in the top of the mind of most universities, of most Chinese teachers and professors, and students and parents” (Lars, general). Moreover, Lars thinks the current image is very bland: “but the thing is always with the image of the Netherlands, it is usually quite neutral or empty, the brand. So we can mould the brand in many ways we want, but it is still very empty. So it is very neutral, a slightly positive image, I think the Chinese students have.” Sophie (general) is slightly more positive and adds to this: “I mean we are not one of the big players, that is for sure. USA, UK, Germany, Canada are the big players, also in China. But the Netherlands is within a good group of smaller countries within the promotion”.

The policymakers’ perspective on what kind of view the Chinese students have of the Netherlands and what attracts them to come study in the Netherlands is quite consistent with what they think their competitive advantages are. Many mention the international environment, the amount of English courses that are provided and also the quality of education and expertise in certain fields. Simon (HBO) even tells: “Also they want to go to the Netherlands in a few sectors, because we are the best in the world. Hospitality, we only compete with Switzerland. They are always in competition who is the best in the world. Also for the Art, all students from all over the world come to study there. The same goes for the Performing Arts in Rotterdam, everybody goes here or to New York”. Whilst Simon talks about specific sectors, Johanna (WO) thinks the general education level is perceived as high. “I think they know in general that our schools,

both Universities of Applied Sciences and Research Universities, are in general very good. We do not have the top level of Oxford and Harvard, but the mean level of universities is very good. We do not have good or bad universities; they are all more or less the same quality.” Others would like it if the Chinese students would not only come to the top-sectors, but also to other sectors and see the broader range of programs they have to offer. “Of course we would like to brand our overall image (...) but to be honest, the most realistic positioning at the moment is our management and economics programs, which is fine as well. They know (Dutch) University is a specialist in the field of management, economics and business administration in general, so this is their view, it would be great to also show them our strength in social sciences, humanities or law. If you look at our high skilled alumni, the president of (a Chinese) University is one of them, the CEO of (a Chinese bank), the main people that they are referring to are mainly from the faculty of economics and management.” Some other policymakers mention more specific images that Chinese students have of the Netherlands such as the stereotypical picture of wooden shoes, tulips and cheese; the Netherlands as a safe and small country which makes it less intimidating; and there are less Chinese students compared to the US and UK. According to Daniel (WO), the last factor is the main reason that Chinese students have shifted towards Europe the last five years. “If you look at the USA or UK, they have been very disappointed when you end up with 60 or 80 Chinese fellow students, when if you are lucky you have more international students.”

Although all the policymakers mention the high quality education they have to offer, most also note that they think the Chinese students often choose the Netherlands as their second choice. “They first look at Harvard, and then they do not qualify, look further and find out that Dutch universities are pretty good. And they find out that the Netherlands as a country is not a bad place to live” (Wout, WO). Simon (HBO) makes a similar remark: “We did interview a few students, they applied to the UK, they did not get in, and then they went to the Netherlands. So we were a little bit the second choice. I do not know if this is always true. We are second choice, because everybody wants to go to Oxford, Stanford, Cambridge. These are the highest.” Somehow, many Dutch policymakers compare themselves with names such as Harvard and Oxford and feel the Chinese students prefer to go there. However, most of the Dutch policymakers also indicate that they do not want to attract more students, but the top students because “we still need much more talents from abroad. We are short of talents in our own country for the near future” (Matthijs, general). They are also aware it is not easy. “Of course we would want to attract the top students. But you know as well as I do, as a Chinese student, why would you go to the Netherlands (...) a lot of Chinese students focus on top US universities such as Harvard. It is therefore not so realistic to attract these top Chinese students. First of all, we are not Harvard.”

4.2.3. UNDERSTANDING THE DUTCH BINARY SYSTEM AND VET

The Netherlands has quite a unique education system which is divided into VET and the binary system: HBO and Research Universities. For native Dutch the distinction between the three kinds of education seems to be obvious and clear; there is a difference of level between the three kinds of education and VET education is mostly vocationally orientated and seen as the lowest level, whereas Research Universities are research orientated and seen as the highest level of education, with HBO in between. However, after having done the interviews with the policymakers, I, myself as a native Dutch, was quite stunned by the perceptions some policymakers had of the difference between the different levels. Some policymakers had a similar perception of the differences in level, which were mainly policymakers of Research Universities, whereas others sincerely believed and also promote that HBO and Research Universities are the same level, but just have a different focus. They also think they should be promoted together. “We made new branding strategies, together with universities, then we put our HBOs next to universities. We have a different orientation. We are next to each other and together we are the higher education sector, in the hope to attract more students and also to explain better what HBO is. I think it is better when universities tell it is the same level, but a different orientation. It is practical orientated research (...) I do believe the level is the same. If you look at the bachelor level, I do believe this” (Simon, HBO). It seems that on the higher level, the policymakers have decided to make the gap between HBO and Research Universities smaller. An agreement has been signed by all Research Universities that they will be promoted together with HBO as Dutch higher education, but many policymakers from Research Universities are not even aware of this and showed some concern and think the distinction should be better clarified. Johanna (WO) says about this: “I am from the older generation, for me I am still not used to the fact that HBO also calls themselves university, which was not the case some years ago. Politically correct you can say the difference is the research. But of course we all know that the entrance level, content of the program, how difficult everything is ...To strengthen the fact that we are a Research University, it is very much content and research driven, it is something we want to make very, very clear. Therefore, we hesitate to do promotion with HBO. General promotions as the Netherlands as a good destination, yes. But then afterwards we would rather present ourselves with a group of Research Universities than together with HBO.” Daniel (WO) adds to this: “At the fairs the Research Universities and HBO are all mingled together, plus some HBOs do not use applied sciences, but for example (name of a Dutch HBO) University, which is not a university, and in certain way misleading students in their choice.” Wout (WO) tells he knows of a student that came to do HBO in the Netherlands and wanted to do a Master afterwards, however later the student found out it was actually very difficult and time-consuming to do

because he first needed to do a pre-master. Also, one of the Chinese students I interviewed, Liam, thought he was going to university but ended up going to HBO. It seems as if promoting HBO and Research Universities together is part of a marketing strategy to make HBO more attractive, but it leaves room for ambiguity and it is sometimes even deceiving. Robin (WO) has a very different view and argues that in order to prevent confusion, HBO and Research Universities should be promoted together. “But that is why we started presenting ourselves together, to make sure these misunderstandings are taken care of from the beginning. And not that if someone applies for university and thinking that he is going to HBO, or the other way around, he finds out he signed up for the wrong program. It is better to make this clear from the beginning, and do it in the same presentation, because we are both higher education.”

There are also some problems with making clear what HBO is, compared to VET. Eline (HBO) explains it is difficult for her to find the right Chinese partner schools because they are not willing to cooperate with a HBO: “I believe that is something of the past, they do not understand. I think the Netherlands has made a mistake in dividing HBOs and Research Universities. Because if you translate Hogeschool, it becomes high school, and they do not understand it. They think we are the same as vocational education, but we offer a bachelor degree of the same level as research universities. We believe it is of better value because you also have the practical experience.” Also on the side of VET education there is some discontent about what people perceive as VET education: “Many still have the impression it is only carpenters and brick layers. But it is everything, it goes from creative industries to hospitals. It is no longer blue-collar work. Even in technology, if you see in the factories, with the most advanced technology and machines they work with. It is no longer dirty or greasy” (Leon, VET). Leon explains that they are trying to raise the status and profile of VET by introducing master titles. “This should not be confused with the academic master title. You know you have the traditional crafts, in patisserie. This is not delivered from the national level, but rewarded from the industry itself. For example, there is a baker association and they will use the term master of bakery, just like in Germany there is Meister. A Meister is someone with a status.” Especially in the case of China, communicating what the different levels mean is difficult because China has equivalents of VET and HBO, but how it is designed and what the difficulty is, is not the same. So when talking about VET or HBO, Chinese people might associate it with what is considered VET and HBO in China. Although it seems that the policymakers are not completely on the same line when it comes down to how to promote the different levels and not satisfied with how the levels are perceived abroad, there are also some that believe the understanding of the levels has improved greatly already. “I think compared to 10 years ago, students could not easily distinguish the difference, but nowadays, especially those bigger recruitment agencies, in their booklets they have explained clearly

in Chinese the difference between Research Universities and HBO because they also have to keep up their good image towards their clients. So they need to clarify the difference, to avoid any type of disappointment when they come to the Netherlands” (Daniel, WO).

4.2.4. STUDYING ABROAD LOSING ITS ALLURE?

Some policymakers already mentioned that the Netherlands can learn from China and the Chinese students. This shows their belief that China is at least on the same level or even better. Others also mention that China is very attractive for them to collaborate with. “There are so many people outside China interested to teach and study in China, there is more and more, every month I meet another Dutch teacher who is going to teach in China for four years or even longer (...). I think it is a matter of time before it becomes more interesting in terms of quality but also diversity and for the international experience to come to China. The sooner the better, because it is already very crowded, you actually have to line up, to work together with Peking University and Tsinghua University, because the whole world wants to study there and wants to do research with them” (Lars, general). The question is whether it will continue to be as interesting for China to collaborate with the Netherlands as vice versa. Some policymakers mention it is already becoming more difficult to attract Chinese students and are doubtful it will become better in the future. “It is more difficult to attract Chinese now than a few years ago. This dip is from the past 2/3 years. It is not really a dip, because then it comes back, but I do not know if it will come back, it might decrease (...). I speculate that more Chinese want to stay home. The quality of Chinese education is going up” (Wout, WO). Others believe the numbers are going down because many Chinese students prefer to stay in Asia and have become more critical. “We try to stay attractive for Chinese students, as we have learned that the group is not getting bigger and students have to rethink where they want to study and what they can get for the money they have” (Sophie, general). Wout (WO) adds to this that because of new initiatives such as branch campuses, Chinese students are also stimulated to stay in China because this way they can still attend a foreign university without going abroad.

However, most of the policymakers think studying abroad will not lose its allure. The main reasons are that studying abroad will still have an added value in terms of a competitive advantage and the international experience itself will keep studying abroad attractive. “I think it is also the general experience that counts. We get a lot of international students that come here from excellent universities, and still they want to come study here at (Dutch city) because we have the special program, special topic, fully international experiences. And I think each university always has its own area of excellence. The research that is done, specific professors, so I do not see this as a problem for the near future” (Johanna,

WO). Another important factor is the stimulating policies from the Chinese government. Especially in the VET and HBO sector there is a huge demand from the Chinese side. China currently has many schools which are considered vocational, but China wants to have 800 HBO schools within ten years and has asked the Netherlands for help with this transformation. At the VET sector China is also very enthusiastic to learn from the Dutch system. “The Chinese are quite curious about the way we have set up VET, the way we are trying to make it attractive for people and the way we put VET down as an alternative way to the top” (Leon, VET). However, these initiatives can also be seen as reasons for the Chinese students to stay in China in the future, because they will have well-developed VET and HBO sectors in the future. Others believe it will still take a long time before China catches up and currently there are not enough spots available at the good Chinese universities for everyone, so going abroad is still a better option for many. Lars (general) explains: “So in fact there are still not enough places for Chinese students at Chinese universities, especially at the top 100 out of the 2400/2500 universities, there is only a top 100, even a top 50 that are really interesting or prestigious for Chinese students to go to. The rest is okay. And okay is not enough on a competitive job market.” Even if China catches up, there are simply so many Chinese students that even if the numbers get lower, the absolute number is still significant. Also, some believe their marketing and recruiting strategy will make sure the Chinese students will keep on coming, and in the worst case scenario, Chinese students are not the only important students they can recruit. “There are many collaborations with China because everyone thinks it has real value and you try to be one of the competitors in the market, but China should not be the only country we put our efforts in (...). We have our other ten countries of course, to attract students as well” (Sophie, general).

4.2.5. CONCLUSION

In general, the Dutch policymakers have a very positive image of the Chinese students. They describe them as a dolphin, whale shark and parrot fish. In their opinion Chinese students are nice, intelligent, hard-working and bring added value. The Chinese are a fish the Netherlands can learn from. However, they also struggle with the change of environment and are like the opposite of Nemo; they have to develop and transform from a shy fish into a more independent fish. In branding Dutch education there does not seem to be a general strategy. Although the Branding Toolkit has been established, all educational institutions brand and promote themselves according to what they think is best. However, when looking closer at what they think their competitive advantages are, it is very similar to the content of the Branding Toolkit: open-minded, international and connected. Dutch policymakers prefer to promote along the lines of their top sectors, quality of education and the international environment they

can offer. This seems to match with their view that Chinese students are hard-working, willing to learn and prefer to go to top universities such as Harvard and Oxford. However, there is still some dissatisfaction with how the different levels are promoted abroad, how they want it to be promoted and how the different levels are actually perceived abroad. Even though all policymakers agree that the visibility of Dutch education is still very small in China, the majority believes studying abroad, or studying in the Netherlands, will not lose its allure in the future. There are many reasons for the Netherlands to continue to be attractive for Chinese students, and even if the numbers decline, there are many students from other countries who can fill in the gap.

5. SURVEY RESULTS

Besides the interviews, I also conducted a survey with my colleague for the Leiden Asia Centre. This survey showed some very interesting results: some supported the findings from the interviews whereas others refute the findings and show very different results. The interviewed students are not randomly selected at all and that is why I think it is very valuable to also share the results from the survey to get a more complete and nuanced image. The aim of this section is just to show a broader view, therefore I will not elaborate too much on the results, but mainly just state them as they are.

5.1. PRIOR IMAGES, EXPECTATIONS AND DESIRES

5.1.1. WHY ABROAD?

The three most important reasons for students to go abroad is to broaden their horizon (4.39)², experience new things (4.20) and to learn to live an independent life (3.86). Other important factors are academic goals (3.74), develop great skills to contribute to China (3.50) and foreign education experiences help them in the domestic job competition (3.46). This is quite similar to the results from the interviews. Factors that apply less are that the students want to learn more about western culture, are disappointed in Chinese education and seek better education abroad, bad environment in China, escape from internal pressure in China and that they feel China is less developed than the West. It is interesting to see that learning about western culture does not score high, although the students do want to broaden their horizon. The students are also not really disappointed in Chinese education and do not think China is less developed than the West, whereas many students I interviewed did show some disappointments with Chinese education and the higher quality of education is often the reason for them to go abroad. I suspect that this result is the consequence of how the statement was framed, and considering that Chinese are very nationalistic, I assume they do not wish to agree with a statement that puts China in a negative light.

5.1.2. NETHERLANDS AND PRIOR IMAGINATIONS

The main reasons Chinese students decided to go to the Netherlands is because they like Europe (3.99), a lot of courses are offered in English (3.83) and they heard Dutch people's English level is high, so they think it is trustworthy (3.69). Other reasons are because they like the Netherlands (3.64), the quality-price ratio (3.58), the school is famous in a particular field (3.45), they can obtain a Schengen visa (3.40) and ranking of the school (3.28). Not so relevant factors are scholarships (2.95), football/tulips/cheese (2.91),

² A Likert Scale was used in which 1 meant strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree, with 3 as a neutral answer.

others students went, but they had no idea about the Netherlands (2.35), famous professor (2.04) and arranged by university so they had no choice (1.78). It is interesting to see that that the students are more attracted to Europe than the Netherlands and that rankings also score relatively low. Many Dutch policy makers have the image that Chinese are very ranking oriented and also the students I interviewed often based their choice on the rankings. Some students in the interviews indicated that the Netherlands was one of the few choices, so that was also the reason for them to come to the Netherlands, but this does not seem to be the case for the majority of the survey respondents. Ryan really seems to be a special case in that he came to the Netherlands because of a professor, as this reason is not validated in the survey. It is also interesting to see that although Chinese students like to stick to their group, they would not choose the Netherlands solely based on the decision of their peers.

The image that most of the respondents had prior to coming to the Netherlands was that the Netherlands is safe and stable (4.35). This is remarkable, because the survey was spread after some big terrorist attacks took place in Belgium and France and there was also a European refugee crisis. The second most important image is that the Netherlands is an open country in which you can speak out your mind without being criticized (4.15) and third, good infrastructure (4.14). This is very interesting, because I think most Dutch people would first think about the second point, and not so much about the Netherlands being a stable and safe country with good infrastructure. But it also shows how important context is. Maybe China is a much more (politically) unstable country than the Netherlands and that is why we would not think about this aspect. The same goes for our infrastructure, we might just have taken it for granted. These points were also mentioned in the interviews with the students, however I did not expect it to be this important in their imagination about the Netherlands. Other important imaginations are high-technology (4.07), equality between people (4.04), clean environment (4.01), the Netherlands as a gateway to Europe (3.99), transparent/well organized (3.95), Dutch people are willing to help others (3.87), Dutch are easy to get along with (3.75), the Netherlands as a developed country in which life is rich and populous (3.67) and straightforwardness and windmills/wooden shoes/tulips scored the lowest with (3.60) and (3.11). It seems that the imagination of the Chinese about the Netherlands is very positive, but this is not strange either as they chose the Netherlands as their study destination. They seem to have a better image of the Netherlands as a whole, about the society and system, than about the specific character of Dutch people. It is also interesting to see that straightforwardness and certainly also wooden shoes, tulips etc., something we Dutch people think everybody thinks about us, have the lowest scores. This is however quite contradictory to the results of the interviews, in which many students did mention wooden shoes and tulips. Something that appeared to be an issue from the interviews with the

policymakers is the communication about the different education levels. 22% of the students had problems with differentiating between HBO and Research Universities and even when we asked the students what kind of level they are currently doing, 4% of the respondents did not know. This shows that the policymakers are not quite effective in their communication.

5.1.3. FAVOURITE COUNTRY

In the survey we asked the students which country, besides China, is their favourite country. A big majority indicated that the Netherlands is their favourite country (n=164), followed by the USA (n=48) and Japan (n=48). It has to be noted that some specifically said, for now the Netherlands is number one and some explained they have not seen enough countries yet to know which one they like most. However, it does seem a majority of the students has very positive experiences with the Netherlands, as they like the Netherlands most. Some participants did not have one favourite country and mentioned more than one and others mentioned Northern-Europe or Europe in general. When looking at the countries mentioned, more than half of them are part of Europe and looking at the top 20, all countries are considered part of the West such as Japan, Singapore, New Zealand and several European countries (Appendix 4). A quarter of the countries are other Asian countries such as Korea, Thailand, Singapore, Taiwan and Japan. Somewhat more unknown countries such as Bhutan, Pakistan and Hungary were also mentioned, but no African or South-American countries. This corresponds to the results from the interviews. Surprisingly, there were still students that said 只爱中国(zhi ai zhongguo), meaning that they only love China, even though we explicitly asked, except for China, what is the country you like most? This shows the nationalistic feelings many of the Chinese have, which also showed in the interviews. From both the interviews with the students and policymakers, England should be a very popular country, however it scores only 5th place after Switzerland and close to Germany. Another surprising result is that Spain and Germany score relatively high, even though some students in the interviews explicitly said they do not like these countries. This could mean that what is considered their favourite country, does not necessarily has to be the same as their preferred study destination.

5.2. EXPERIENCING THE NETHERLANDS

The things that the students like most about the Netherlands is the equal relationship between teachers and student (3.87), the practical content (3.70), the research skills of the teacher are high (3.62) and the guidance of the teacher is very good (3.57). This corresponds to the results of the interviews. We also asked the students what they gained by studying in the Netherlands and listed 13 different things and

surprisingly they agreed to all of them (>3.99). The most important gains are that they have become more accepting and opened up to other cultures (4.37), they increased their English level (4.35) and increased their knowledge in their major (4.33). It is interesting to see that 'gained competitive advantage' scored relatively low compared to the other factors (4.08). The question is whether their experience in the Netherlands did not provide them with a big competitive advantage or whether it is just relatively small because many Chinese go abroad for their study.

A very interesting result is that the English environment is one of the main reasons to come to the Netherlands, however, in reality the Chinese students are most disappointed about this. The amount of information that is available in English is less than expected and Dutch people often speak Dutch which makes integrating more difficult. Moreover, socializing is also difficult because the English of the Chinese students themselves is not good enough. However, the students do not respond very enthusiastically about potential activities set up by associations, although the students in the interviews mentioned this might be good to make socializing with other students easier. Another thing that makes making friends with foreigners difficult is a different communicating style. Many students indicated in the interviews they like the straightforward way of communicating, so it could be that this is just the case for this group of students or that there are other elements in communicating which makes it difficult for Chinese students to make international friends. Another shared difficulty is that the students think the tuition fee is too high compared to Dutch students and therefore it is unfair (3.91). This was also mentioned in the interviews, but particularly by one student. The survey shows it is a widely shared sentiment. Another difficult thing is when Dutch people speak about negative news about China they feel uncomfortable (3.42). This again shows their nationalistic nature. A stunning 85% thinks they also lost something by studying abroad. Their most important losses are not able to increase their Chinese connections/network (68%) and spending a lot of money (61%). However, after having experienced the Netherlands, 86% of the respondents would make the same decision again to go to the Netherlands, so I assume they do think it is worth the money.

In the survey I also put an open question in which I asked the students whether their prior expectations became reality. Overall, the students replied yes to this question. The positive expectations that became positive experiences are related to their study, the Netherlands as an open country in which you can freely speak out your mind and the equality between people. The environment is also beautiful, clean and safe and Dutch people turned out to be friendly and they liked the international environment and they made international friends. The students also told they learned to be more independent, arrange their own life and have their own thoughts. Some even pointed out that their experiences were even more

positive than expected. One student said it turned out to be more open and that to his surprise, it was not chaotic. Others mentioned they learned more than expected and that the environment is cleaner and the people are friendlier. However, some expectations did not come true and became negative experiences. Some thought the study life would be more relaxed here, but it turned out to be more stressful. A few students were also disappointed in the quality of education, think the Netherlands is not as advanced as they thought and argue that many Dutch people have negative stereotypes about Chinese people, are sometimes rude and it is difficult to make friends with them. In terms of the environment, some think it is not as safe as they thought, the weather is worse and not everything is in English. The facilities were sometimes also disappointing because the Netherlands does not really have big campuses with all kinds of facilities.

5.3. PLANS AFTER GRADUATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Roughly one third of the students wants to apply for a search year and roughly one fifth has not made up their mind yet. Others immediately want to return to china (16%), want to continue studying in the Netherlands (16%) or want to go to another country to develop further (14%). Of the other countries that the students want to go to, America ranks number one with 45%. This is in line with that America is their second favourite country after the Netherlands. Their nationalistic feelings also show in their plans after graduation. Many students want to do something for China, regardless whether they stay in the Netherlands or not (3.47). The majority of the Chinese students see themselves as part of the international students and do not think there should be anything done especially for the Chinese (73%). It is interesting to see that although they say they are part of the international group, they still have very nationalistic feelings and feel the Dutch should understand them better. Not surprisingly, the 27% of the students that do want special policies, mentioned they would like to have more opportunities to tell the Dutch people about their country and culture, because now there are a lot of stereotypes and misunderstandings. Also the English environment could be better: English information from school, government, health related information, more English courses and social activities in which the main language is English. In terms of facilities there should be more opportunities to eat Chinese food and there is a need for different kinds of counsellors, such as counsellors that are familiar with Chinese culture and that help with the general life in the Netherlands.

6. DISCUSSION

The answer to the question raised by Hansen & Thøgersen (2015) “what would it take for ‘abroad’ to lose its allure?” (p.9) is not clear, but it seems that it has not lost its allure yet and will probably not lose its allure in the near future. The Chinese students are attracted to study abroad because of the image that abroad is a better and foreign and exciting place. Images such as mentioned by Fong (2011), that the West is part of the imagined developed world community and represents paradise was also true for the Chinese students in my study. However, these images were mainly valid for Northern European countries, and not necessarily always for the US or even Southern European countries. The latter were associated with fun, but also with less structure and stability and America was not only associated with high quality, but also with violence, poverty and discrimination. This corresponds with the concept of Occidentalism, which is mainly aimed at the US (Buruma & Margalit, 2005). The Chinese students do differentiate between different western countries and what is considered as the imagined developed world community is therefore not just the West, but even more specific countries that belong to the West. However, it has to be noted that the respondents of the survey did indicate the US as their second favourite country and as one of their most desired study destination countries. The images are mixed and a possible explanation for these results could be that the participants of the survey could only indicate what their favourite country is, so even if there were respondents that disliked America, they could only express this opinion by choosing a different country as their favourite country. Another explanation could be that regardless of the negative images Chinese have of the US, they still believe it to be more developed than other countries, which makes it a desirable study destination country. Although the students did not mention it explicitly, they also hoped to gain a better life through their experience abroad. The temporal sequence of advancing (Hansen, 2015) in which there is a shared imagination that studying abroad can give them a competitive advantage also applied to them. Some were upset with the Chinese education and wanted to experience a less stressful, more interesting and open study environment. For them, going abroad was a temporary escape from the immense pressure on academic achievement in China and other negative aspects of Chinese education. On the contrary, others wanted to study abroad mainly to enhance their resume and have a better position in finding a good job when they return to China. However, studying abroad was not a common phenomenon for everyone, which shows that studying abroad has not become an integral part of the temporal sequence of advancing yet. Another very important reason for the Chinese students to go abroad is broadening their horizon and exploring new places, cultures and people. This seemed to be of somewhat less importance in previous research (Biao & Shen, 2009; Liu, Elston & Zhou,

2013), but it is of equal or perhaps even greater importance than gaining a competitive advantage in my study. Some students were really fascinated by the foreign world and foreign people. They wanted to go outside their own context and experience what the world has to offer outside of China. Some students even indicated that they did not really plan to go abroad, but it was more like a spontaneous decision, which shows that their decision to study abroad was certainly not mainly motivated by academic or career purposes. This implies that some of the Chinese students in my study might already belong to a new generation, a generation of students that are better off and also go abroad for just the fun and the experience, just like many western students do. However, the parents are still very influential and played a big role in their child's decision to go abroad. Some parents even decided the major for their child, but interestingly, when asking the students who had the biggest impact on their decision-making, they mentioned themselves. This could be a socially desirable answer, or the students in my study were really different. As Lars mentioned, the Chinese students are also changing and the international student population is becoming more and more homogenous. This could also be related to the individualism that characterizes the generation born after 1980, or the millennial generation, worldwide (see Moore, 2005; Yi, Ribbens & Morgan, 2010).

Internationalization is a strategy of educational institutions to earn money, stay competitive and enhance the quality of their education. For Dutch education institutions, earning money seemed to be less of a crucial factor than the literature (Bodycott, 2009; Rizvi, 2006; Altbach & Knight, 2007) suggests. This can be explained by the fact that most Dutch educational institutions are partly funded by the government and not completely privatised. Their main goals are to stay competitive and attract the most talented students. To accomplish this, they promote the high quality of their education, their top sectors and the international environment they offer. This helps to reinforce the developed-developing discourse, the imagined global education hierarchy and the Netherlands as the place to be. Even though many of the policymakers personally do not like the ranking systems, they do think the Chinese students value rankings very much and therefore policymakers consider rankings to be important in promoting and making the Netherlands more attractive. They seem to be effective in their branding strategy as the factors mentioned above are also the main reasons for the students to come to the Netherlands. The image the Dutch policymakers have of the Chinese students also fits their marketing and branding strategies. Chinese students are seen as intelligent, hardworking and eager to learn. Moreover, they are of added value and can improve the quality of Dutch education. It is therefore logical that the policymakers want to attract more Chinese students and do so by promoting the aspects that are related to a certain prestige and a high quality learning environment. Another image of the Chinese students is that they like to stay

in a group, find it difficult to mingle and might encounter a culture shock because they are not so flexible. Promoting the Netherlands as an international country in which English is an often used language and the Netherlands as an open and tolerant country, makes it a very welcoming country for the Chinese. However, the results from the survey show that the promoted images were not necessarily the most important prior imaginations that the Chinese students had of the Netherlands. The Netherlands as a safe, stable and open place with good infrastructure was more dominant than the Netherlands as a developed country. Moreover, the Chinese students I interviewed mainly mentioned the stereotypical images of tulips, cheese and wooden shoes. Another unique selling point that is promoted well, is the Netherlands as a country that offers study programmes which can also train the middle tiers of the workforce. Although the inbound mobility of Chinese VET students is limited, due to legal barriers, there are a lot of Chinese students on Dutch HBO schools and there is a big demand from China in collaborating in the VET and HBO sector.

Aspects in which the Dutch policymakers were less effective are joint branding, communicating the differences between the different educational levels and creating a broader image. Even though the policymakers all mainly branded aspects that were part of the Branding Toolkit, only a few were aware that there was a general branding strategy. Moreover, all policymakers shared the same view that the visibility of Dutch education in the Chinese market is very small and that joint branding could offer a solution. Even though the first efforts have been made by the VSNU and Vereniging Hogescholen, it does not really get off the ground. As far as communicating the different educational levels is concerned, there is dissatisfaction from all levels and all sides. The policymakers do not agree on what the exact differences are between HBO and Research Universities and are not satisfied with how they are promoted abroad and how foreign countries perceive the different educational levels in relation to each other. Moreover, a proportion of the Chinese students has difficulties with differentiating the different levels; some were even wrongly informed about what kind of level education they would attend and some respondents of the survey did not even know what level they are currently attending. A few policymakers also expressed the wish to promote a broader image than just the top sectors, but from the survey it was found that most students are still enrolled at studies related to economics, engineering and agriculture. It appears they have not yet succeeded in promoting this broader image. In a different light, it can be said that the policymakers that did want to promote along the lines of the top sectors are effective. An aspect that is less mentioned in the literature is how the receiving country can learn from the sending country. Some Dutch policymakers explicitly mention that Dutch higher education can learn and gain from the influx of Chinese students. They contribute to the international classroom, have a good working ethic and China

itself is also developing and delivering increasingly higher quality education. However, it will take a long time before China reaches the same level as the Netherlands and just the international component of studying abroad alone, will make sure that studying abroad will not lose its allure.

The Chinese students in my study experienced both gains and losses. However, their general perception of their experiences in the Netherlands is very positive. A great majority of the survey respondents indicated they did not regret coming to the Netherlands and would make the same decision again. The students experienced the open and free culture of the Netherlands, the equality between people, the international environment, clean environment, straightforward way of communication and high quality education and facilities. These students did not redefine their image of abroad as the Chinese students in Fong's (2011) study did, but their experiences confirmed their prior imaginations. However, for some respondents from the survey the Netherlands was a disappointment. They were disappointed in the quality of education, the presence of an English environment and the one-sided and prejudiced images that Dutch people have of China. Although the Chinese students I interviewed felt it to a much lesser extent, they also experienced disappointments and losses. The workload and difficulty of their study was sometimes higher than they expected and English continuously formed a barrier, both in their academic and social environment. The English environment that attracted the Chinese students to the Netherlands, appeared to be the main cause of their problems. Making international friends was one of their goals, but not always easy because of the language and cultural barriers. Some even indicated that they do not like places with too many Chinese because then they miss the whole point of going abroad. However, the Chinese student enclaves that Chen & Ross (2015) researched in America, seem to be also present in the Netherlands. Although the big campuses in America are non-existent in the Netherlands, the Chinese students often lived together, set up their own community and enjoyed doing things together with other Chinese and helped each other with their difficulties. For many Chinese students staying with the Chinese group or being an individual and make friends with other internationals was a difficult paradox. Interestingly, the students I interviewed considered themselves to be doing well in this regard compared to other Chinese students and felt that facilitating activities are not necessary for them, but mainly for other Chinese students. This could again mean they are really different or perhaps part of a new generation, or it is the result of a cognitive bias which leads them to see themselves in a more positive light. Either way, the majority of the Chinese students did not show dissatisfaction with their current situation. Other losses they experienced are that they missed their family and friends, were not able to gain work experience or establish a network in China. Some also experienced discrimination, but explained it was not that bad because it was part of what they had already expected. Prior imaginations

are thus also important for the students' actual experiences in my study. Some students did not want to have any prior expectations because they were afraid to be disappointed, while others even prepared for the worst. Even though the promotional activities of the policymakers are important, in my study the Chinese students already had the multiple imaginaries that Härkönen & Devin (2015) pressed for, which made it easier for them to cope with their problems or disappointments.

Studying abroad might not lose its allure, but attracting the Chinese students to stay in the Netherlands is a different story. Almost all Chinese students I interviewed are eventually planning on returning to China. Filial nationalism, patriotism and filial piety seem to be omnipresent. One of Liam's aims to come to the Netherlands was to learn from the agriculture system and bring that knowledge back to China. The survey even showed that many Chinese students want to do something for China, regardless whether they stay in the Netherlands or not. Another important reason to return home is the obligation to take care of the parents and spend more time with them. In Fong's (2011) study, a large part of the Chinese students became part of the floating population after their study abroad period, not identifying with China nor with another country. However, in my study this was not the case. Although many students are still exploring the world, their love for China is obvious. The students feel offended when people talk negatively about China, they miss their family and friends and some even prefer their life in China over their life in the Netherlands. However, many students do first want to apply for the search year and gain some work experience abroad, as just a foreign degree is not enough anymore to make a difference in the competitive Chinese domestic market. Therefore, the temporal mode of ceaseless striving mentioned by Hansen (2015) seems to be true for the Chinese students. They realize that obtaining one thing is not enough and to finally arrive at their final destination they continuously need to advance. Nevertheless, the students do think the final stop is in sight and very promising. They genuinely believe their experience abroad makes a difference and Lily even identifies herself with a shark that is able to eat all the small fishes when she is back in China. Whether this will become reality or whether the students continue to be in a race and battle towards a goal that continues to be far away, only time will be able to tell. However, for now the images of studying abroad are predominantly positive and keep on attracting the Chinese students. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the image of studying abroad will lose its allure. As Salazar's (2012) definition of imagination suggests: "imaginaries are socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people's personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices" (p.864). Imagination is both personal and shared and also normative in that it determines what students should strive for and where they should obtain it. Both the students themselves and the policymakers are sustaining and reinforcing the dominant imaginings that depict the west as the place

to be and largely influence Chinese students' decision to study abroad. So not only economic and other structural factors motivate Chinese students to go overseas, but the imaginations they have about abroad are just as important or maybe even more important in their decision-making.

7. CONCLUSION

The main goals of this research are to demonstrate the importance of imagination in Chinese students' decision-making process and to gain insight in the stories of Chinese students in the Dutch context. To this end, I formulated the following research question: What is the role of imagination in Chinese students' decision to choose the Netherlands as their overseas study destination and how do the strategies of Dutch policymakers shape this imagination? My study showed the crucial role of imagination in choosing a study destination. Although the Chinese students walked different paths to finally arrive at the same destination, the Netherlands, they were all attracted by the image that studying abroad can give them something that China cannot. The image that the Netherlands offers high-quality education for a relatively low price, and offers an open, free, advanced and English friendly environment, led most of the Chinese students to the Netherlands. Their imagination was formed by their own subjectivity, the collective imagination that the West equals quality and the marketing and branding policies of the policymakers that reinforced their already dominant images. The Dutch policymakers in their turn, also had very positive images of the Chinese students. They regarded them as friendly, intelligent, hard-working and also of added-value to Dutch education; they can learn and gain from the Chinese students. Although the policymakers did not adhere to a general branding strategy and work very individually, unknowingly, they mainly brand aspects that are part of the national branding strategy, the branding toolkit, and promote an image that seems especially welcoming for the Chinese students. Chinese students are hard-working and find education important, while they also have difficulties with blending in and adjusting to a different environment. Branding the Netherlands as an open-minded, international and a connected country that offers high quality (English) education, meets the needs and wishes of the Chinese students. Moreover, the images that the Dutch policymakers promote are also the main reasons that attract the Chinese students to the Netherlands, which implies that their marketing strategies are effective. The experiences of the Chinese students generally did not disappoint them and were quite similar to their prior-imaginings. Although they also experienced losses and some of the respondents of the survey indicated they were disappointed, the vast majority of the students gained a lot. They were able to broaden their horizon, increase their knowledge and enjoy a clean, open, equal and free environment. Surprisingly, one of the main reasons that attracted them to come to the Netherlands, the English environment, was also the source of most of their problems. This is the biggest incongruence that I found in my study. They encountered English problems both in their academic and social environment because their English was often lacking. On the other hand, the survey respondents indicated that the provision of English information from the

government, school and in daily life is also lacking. Not as much information is provided in English as they hoped and expected. This is probably one of their main disillusionments. However, all the students I interviewed and the vast majority of the survey respondents said that they did not regret their decision to come to the Netherlands and they liked their stay. Nevertheless, it does not persuade the students to stay abroad for the rest of their lives. Although they want to gain some work experience abroad which gives them a better position in the competitive Chinese market or just explore the world, family ties and nationalistic feelings still prevail and leads the students eventually back home.

The image of studying abroad is still very rosy and the promotion and branding policies of the policymakers help sustain this image. The Netherlands should therefore not be afraid that studying abroad will lose its allure. However, competition continues to be fierce and as China is still developing, the Chinese students are also changing. It is therefore important to stay informed about China's development and the possible changing images, desires and needs of the Chinese students. Policymakers can actively shape the imaginations that Chinese students have of studying abroad and should therefore use their knowledge of the Chinese students to use the most effective branding and promoting strategies to stay competitive. Understanding from Chinese tradition, education is an integral aspect of Chinese culture. Branding the Netherlands as a country that offers high-quality education will therefore continue to be a main factor that attracts the Chinese students. Consequently, the Dutch policymakers should continue to emphasize the high-quality education they offer in their future promoting strategies. One of the main things that can improve is the internal communication between the different educational institutions. Although close cooperation is difficult because of the competition between the institutions, many policymakers themselves also recognize the need for joint branding and the establishment of a united front. In the end it is not only about branding an individual institution, but also about making the Netherlands, as a country, more visible in China. To do this, the institutions should work together because the impact of joint branding is much bigger than individual branding. Closer cooperation will also enhance the mutual understanding of what the different education levels pertain and how they should be promoted abroad. Currently, there are still some disagreements of which the policymakers themselves are not even aware that lead to ambiguities and sometimes even to the deception of the Chinese students. As Robin says: "But what they are underestimating is that they are not fishing in the same pond, they are all fishing in the same ocean". Of course there is competition, but the pool of Chinese students is so big that the competition is less fierce than many policymakers might think and closer cooperation is therefore a realistic solution. Future research can address the issues that have caused the collaboration and cooperation between the Dutch education institutions to be this limited, assess what the most effective

channels are for communicating the promotional images to the Chinese students, research whether the imaginations of the Chinese students are different from students from other nationalities and whether the international student population is really becoming more homogeneous.

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APPENDIX 1: TOPIC LIST CHINESE STUDENTS

Introduction

1. Please introduce yourself briefly
 - free to answer
 - Age
 - place of birth
 - educational background

Choosing the Netherlands

2. Why did you choose to study abroad?
 - What were your goals, what did you want to gain by studying abroad? (foreign experience, competitive advantage, language).
 - Do your friends and classmates share the same wish to study abroad?
 - Is it common for students from your hometown to study abroad?
3. How do you view China in comparison to the rest of the world?
4. What kind of image do you have of the West?
5. Why did you choose the Netherlands?
6. Which other countries did you choose in your top list? What were the relative positive aspects of the NL?
 - What kind of image did you have of the West/Netherlands?
7. Please explain in a detailed manner your decision-making process
 - mainly influenced by: parents, teacher, students, media, own wish, family relationships
 - application process (broker, help, difficulties)

Choosing the school and the program

8. Why/how did you choose this school? (prestige, education quality)
 - Do you understand the differences between MBO, Hogeschool and University?
9. Why did you choose this program/major?

Study experiences

10. Do you still remember your first day at school? How was it?
 - Was it what you expected how it would be?
11. How many Chinese students are there in your class, program?
 - do you have many international/Dutch/Chinese friends?
12. When you just started going to school, what was the biggest challenge?
13. In the years that you have studied here, what school arrangements did you like or not?
 - (differences with Chinese education, education quality)
14. Do you think there should be special arrangements for Chinese students? (applying, language courses, English majors, Chinese student association)
15. What were your costs on tuition, traveling, housing? Funding from parents?
16. Did the expectations/images you had of the Netherlands come true? Or not?
 - Having experienced the Netherlands, would you still make the same decision and come here for your study?
17. After studying here for a while, what are the biggest gains/effects on you?
 - How has studying abroad changed your life (upward mobility, life goals, broadened horizon)
18. Have you achieved the goals you wanted to achieve?

19. What would you advise other Chinese students that come here to study?

Choices after graduation

20. What are your plans after graduation? Searching for a job in the Netherlands?

- Continue advancing your studies? Return home? And why?

21. Do you think by studying in the NL, you have gained a competitive advantage? Why? (because western, Dutch or specific university qualities?)

22. Would staying here be easy or not? What about your parents?

Concluding:

- what was the most challenging, did you miss or can improve?
- What did you like the most?
- Metaphor

APPENDIX 2: TOPIC LIST POLICYMAKERS

A. Brief introduction

B. General trends

1. Do you want to attract more Chinese students and why?
 - In which field of study and why
 - Where is the most potential for growth? Does this align with the current situation?
2. What is the current situation?
 - Amount of Chinese students, field of study, place of origin? Any changes in last 5 years?
 - Internationalization is high on the political agenda, what are the consequences for you? Any differences (What kind of adjustments have Dutch government and the education sector made in coping with those trends?)
3. What policies do you think are effective to attract Chinese students to the Netherlands?
 - Will there be any changes of policy in the future?

C. Cooperation

4. Any trend of change in the cooperation between Dutch and Chinese institutions?
 - New initiatives in cooperation and exchange (shadowing program, MOOCs)
 - Why are the Chinese so interested in you? And in which sectors?
 - How do different parties respond to those initiatives (students, NL/CH institutions, companies, government)
 - Best practices or things we can learn from those projects/initiatives
5. Some argue that studying abroad will eventually lose its allure as China is developing and the education quality is also getting better
 - How do you see the future cooperation? Will it be more equal?
 - Do you think that Chinese students that study in NL still have a competitive advantage over their peers that stay in China (Losses versus gains). What about the future?
 - How should NL cope with this

D. Marketing

6. What is the competitive edge of NL in general?
 - Compared to other countries, how is NL different (education quality, clean air, open-minded)
7. What is your competitive edge?
8. What are the factors that attract international students to go to your institution in the NL?
 - What are the reasons for Chinese students specifically?
 - Are the students familiar with the different education levels?

- Are you aware that there are some misunderstanding created by translation. (e.g. HBO, University confusion). Is it a promotion strategy? Do you think it needs to be clarified?
9. How is the brand awareness of Dutch institutions in China?
- What kind of image do Chinese students have?
 - do you promote only your education level, the Netherlands as a whole, or Netherlands as part of EU?
 - How should Dutch education be branded to best promotion itself?
10. How does NL promote Dutch schools?
- Who do you target (parents, students, schools or collaboration with nuffic)
 - Which channels do you use and which ones are the most effective (summer camp, website, social media, online open days, career markets, secondary schools, teachers, agencies)
 - What are the difficulties? (no international rankings, no comparable levels abroad)

E. Special needs

11. What's your impression of Chinese students studying in the NL?
- What problems do you think they encounter? (personal, social/international friends, educational, financial, accommodation, application/preparation)
 - Do they have an appropriate education level? (huikao)
 - What can or should NL do to better facilitate their study and stay?
 - (English, discrimination, growing up, curriculum, separate group for Chinese, Chinese language services, schooling of teachers)
12. Who are the potential partners that you think you could work with to provide better services for Chinese students? What can you do together? How should you support each other?
- Chinese student's association
 - Churches
 - Chinese institutions

F. After study

13. Do you have special services that could facilitate Chinese students to find a job?
- Do you think it is your duty to do so?
14. Is there a match between what kind of knowledge workers the Netherlands want to have and what kind of study Chinese students come to do here in the Netherlands?
15. Metaphor

APPENDIX 3: METAPHOR

3



4



5



6

³ © Fishfingers & Custard from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/psychophrenic/7980062360>

⁴ © Ichthyologist from <http://ichthyologist.tumblr.com/post/17480646682/not-so-many-fish-in-the-sea-despite-covering-70>

⁵ © R. Dirscherl/Photoshot/solent from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2196238/Fastest-fish-sea-decimate-school-sardines-minutes.html>

⁶ © crazy-frankenstein.com from <http://www.hd-wallpapersdownload.com/desktop-sea-fish-wallpaper-dowload/>

APPENDIX 4: SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. 年龄:
2. 性别:
3. 你攻读的专业为:
4. 你在中国上过的大学是 (选项按照字母顺序排列)
5. 谁对你作出出国留学的决定产生过较大影响? 请用数字1-6给他们排序, 1为最小影响, 6为最大影响。 你可以用鼠标拖动几个选项来进行排序。
6. 你的学习项目属于下面哪种形式:
7. 你是独生子女吗?
8. 你在中国上过大学吗?
9. 你目前在荷兰攻读:
10. 这是你攻读在荷兰注册的第一个学习项目吗?
11. 你在荷兰注册的第一个学习项目是:
12. 你就读的学校是:
13. 来荷兰留学之前你或者你的父母是否来过荷兰?
14. 我得到了奖学金来荷兰念书
15. 我的奖学金来自
16. 这份奖学金是我选择来荷兰的最终决定因素
17. 你来荷兰已经有__年__月了
18. 你预计在荷兰的学习时间总共将为____ (年 / 月)
19. 你的户口是
 - 直辖市
 - 自治区
 - 特别行政区
 - 省份
20. 你的中学是在你的家乡上的吗?
21. 以下描述对你有多合适? 请用1-5数字表示。
22. 在这个世界上你最喜欢的除了中国以外的国家是:
23. 越来越多的中国学生选择出国留学, 但他们留学的原因却不尽相同。 请选择数字1-5表示下面一系列描述与你情况的符合程度。我想出国留学是:
24. 你当初的首选出国留学国家是?
25. 荷兰是你出国留学的首选目的地吗?
26. 下面是一些在中国学生列出的关于荷兰的印象。请根据这些描述对你

选择来荷兰的重要程度给出 1 — 5 分。

- 27.你听说过NESO或者NUFFIC这个组织吗?
- 28.在众多出国留学的目的地中你最终选择了荷兰。以下是一些学生们选择荷兰留学的考虑, 请用数字 1 — 5 表示这些考虑是否适用于你的状况。我选择来荷兰留学是因为:
- 29.你是通过以下哪种渠道了解到荷兰相关院校的信息的? (可多选)
- 30.在申请留学荷兰的过程中你得到的最重要的信息是用哪种语言提供的?
- 31.如果可以重新选择一次, 你还会选择来到荷兰吗?
- 32.如果重新选择一次, 你会选择哪个国家作为留学目的地?
- 33.你会推荐你的朋友来荷兰留学吗?
- 34.你在准备来荷期间是否遇到过以下困难? (可以多选)
- 35.你在办理来荷留学时有使用中介吗?
- 36.你在哪些方面使用了中介的帮助 (可多选)
- 37.你对中介的服务满意吗?
- 38.你会建议别人使用留学中介吗?
- 39.你在中国的学习为你在荷兰留学做了好的准备吗? (可多选)
- 40.荷兰学校的课程要求适合你吗?
- 41.学校课程在哪方面让你觉得不太合适你? (可多选)
- 42.我在留学期间感觉到与其他国家学生交流有障碍。
- 43.有障碍的原因是: (可多选)
- 44.在荷兰留学的同学们有时会谈到下面的一些困难或挑战。这些想法符合你的状况或者体验吗? 请用 1 — 5 数字表示。
- 45.以下是一些同学提到的喜欢在荷兰学习的原因, 这些论述与你的经历相符吗?
- 46.在荷兰留学的同学们也会有以下的一些收获, 你也有同感吗? 请用 1 — 5 表示这些收获对你的重要程度。
- 47.请用数字 1 — 5 表示下面几段描述与你的情况是否符合。
- 48.在国外留学也会让你失去些什么吗?
- 49.你觉得在国外留学你会有哪些方面的损失呢? (可多选)
- 50.如果你重新选择一次, 你还会选择出国留学吗?
- 51.你在荷兰的学习, 会让你得到相应的从业资格证书吗?
- 52.你在荷兰得到的从业证书可以在其他国家使用吗?
- 53.你会期望在以下几个方面能有一些额外的课程可上吗? 请用数字 1 — 5 表示它们对你的重要程度。
- 54.以下是一些中国同学在荷兰喜欢参加的组织活动, 请用数字“1-5”表示

它们对你的重要程度。

55. 以下哪些因素改变之后会有助于你在荷兰的学习生活（可多选）
56. 毕业之后的打算
57. 你最想去的其他国家是
58. 如果学校能够为中国学生做一些政策、课程、设施等方面的调整，你有什么样的建议？（请给出具体意见）
59. 有人觉得中国学生是国际学生的一部分，学校不应该为中国学生做特殊安排。你同意吗？
60. 你觉得荷兰的教育系统有什么可以和中国学习的吗？
61. 请具体说明荷兰教育系统有什么可以和中国学习的方面：
62. 经过在荷兰留学的这段历程，你觉得自己最初对荷兰的期盼是真实的吗？请给出具体解释。

APPENDIX 5: FAVOURITE COUNTRY

Survey response to the question: “What is your favourite country, excluding China?”

Country	N
1. The Netherlands	164
2. US	48
3. Japan	48
4. Switzerland	31
5. UK	29
6. Germany	27
7. Spain	17
8. New Zealand	15
9. Singapore	13
10. Sweden	11
11. France	10
12. Italy	9
13. Canada	8
14. Australia	8
15. Greece	7
16. Norway	7
17. Austria	4
18. Czech Republic	4
19. Ireland	4
20. S-Korea	4
21. Taiwan	3
22. China	3
23. Hungary	2

24. Iceland	2
25. Israel	2
26. Portugal	2
27. Europe	2
28. Denmark	2
29. Thailand	1
30. Pakistan	1
31. Nepal	1
32. N-Korea	1
33. Malaysia	1
34. Bhutan	1
35. Luxembourg	1
36. N-Europe	1
37. Russia	1
total (N)	495

	Europe
	the West (other than EU)
	Asia
	Other

About the Author:

Ju Lin v Veldhuizen is a graduate student from the University Utrecht, the Netherlands. As her name suggests, she is both Chinese and Dutch. Born in China, but adopted at a young age and therefore as Dutch as any other Dutch student. However, her Chinese roots became more visible and more important to her when she grew older and right now she identifies herself with both the Netherlands and China. With a background in Interdisciplinary Social Sciences, which is a combination of social sciences, psychology and cultural anthropology, she has always been fascinated with the interplay between the individual's mind, group dynamics and the society as a whole. Together with a master in Governance, the topic about Chinese students in the Netherlands, policy and imagination came naturally to her. This is her first work on this topic, but her ambitions and interests motivate her to pursue more in this field.

