

Aspiration and Integration Infrastructure: a Study on Chinese Students' Integration in Finland and Germany

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Aspiration and Integration Infrastructure: A Study on Chinese Students' Integration in Finland and Germany

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Abstract

European countries such as Germany and Finland are increasingly interested in attracting and retaining international tertiary students to supply their workforces with highly skilled labor. However, the retention rate among international tertiary graduates is relatively low despite the favourable policy incentives. Drawing on field research on mainland Chinese tertiary-level students in Finland and Germany, this article unravels this “mystery” by pinpointing a trend towards a “weak integration trap” among Chinese students. Weak integration trap refers to the situation in which the students can ensure their survival, but lack the capability to pursue their aspirations, to gain access to valuable resources in the host society, or to become full members of that society. They may in consequence fail to complete their studies and remain in the host society after graduation as they desired, and may also lack a sense of belonging, or experience low levels of well-being. This weak integration trap may be caused by a lack of aspiration for further integration, or insufficient, unevenly distributed and conflictual integration infrastructure. This article conceptualizes and examines the crucial nexus between integration aspiration and integration infrastructure that leads to the weak integration trap, and outlines implications for future research.

Key words: integration, integration infrastructure, aspiration, Chinese student, Finland, Germany

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1. Introduction

One paradox regarding today's student migration is that while many countries, such as Finland and Germany, have introduced favorable policies to not only attract, but also to retain international tertiary-level graduates, the retention rates of international graduates, especially among those coming from outside the EU/EEA countries, are still comparatively low. In 2011, the percentage of international students changing residence permit status after graduation was only around 25 percent in Germany, and 22 percent in Finland (Morris-Lange & Brands, 2015). However, in countries such as Canada and Australia, for instance, the corresponding percentages are over 30 percent. While the economic and societal conditions of the host societies and other external factors play a vital role, whether students wishing to stay are successful in integrating into the host societies also plays a decisive role. Past research has repeatedly documented cases of international students who study abroad but end up engaging mostly in 'co-ethnic bubbles' or 'international bubbles' with limited interaction with either the host nationals or the host society (Rienties, Heliot, & Jindal-Snape, 2013; Zhou & Cole, 2017). Especially for students studying in non-Anglophone countries, it is not uncommon for some of them to stay many years without learning or becoming very fluent in the local language, which creates a major barrier when after graduation they seek work in the host society (Bessey, 2012; Meng, Zhu, & Cao, 2018; Rienties, Luchoomun, & Tempelaar, 2014; Zhu, 2012). This draws our attention to the individual and structural factors contributing to better integration of international tertiary-level students.

To better understand the integration of international students, this research will differentiate between integration into the academic contexts and the societal contexts. Academic contexts includes the higher education environments in which the international students' academic and social lives are embedded. Societal contexts refers to the social, cultural and economic environments in which the students live within the host societies. The students may have aspirations for integrating into the academic contexts but very often, only those students wishing to remain in the country are motivated to integrate into the societal contexts (Li & Pitkänen, 2018).

In this article I explore the integration experiences of international students in both academic and societal contexts through a case study of Chinese students in Finland and Germany. I analyze the experiences of those Chinese students wishing not only to successfully complete their studies but also intending to stay in the host country. Chinese students constitute the largest group of international migrant students in the world (Börjesson, 2017). Numerous

studies have been presented on the integration of Chinese and other international students in Anglophone countries such as the U.K., the U.S.A. and Australia. However, little research has focused on the integration experiences and challenges of international students in non-Anglophone countries. This research aims to narrow the gap through this case study.

One interesting phenomenon emerging from the research is that many Chinese students were successful in adapting in their daily lives and studies, in establishing networks, and even in finding work in the host society. However, they still lack the capability to achieve equal access to valuable resources in the host societies, to pursue their aspirations, or to become full members of the host societies. This phenomenon is especially evident in non-Anglophone EU countries, since the local language may be a significant barrier to international students' integration. The language barrier may lead to difficulties in completing studies, finding internships or part-time jobs, and also in finding future career opportunities after graduation. It was observed that both in Finland and Germany that even among those students who managed to find a job (such as working as doctoral researchers), the sense of belonging and personal wellbeing was often low due to the language barrier that prevented them from socializing with local people and leading their daily lives as they wished.

This article argues that this phenomenon is a result of an interaction of lacking integration aspirations and inadequate and incoherent integration infrastructure to support such students' integration.

'Integration aspiration' is defined here as a person's motivational drive to take the actions needed to become an active and competent member of the host society. This may be achieved through various activities, such as language learning, socializing with host nationals, looking for job opportunities and so on. Aspiration can be seen as a mindset or attitude (Carling, 2014; Carling & Collins, 2018a), that is "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Similar to integration aspiration, some literature uses the term 'motivation for integration', defined by Kim (Kim, 2001) as the extent to which migrants are willing to make efforts to participate and become functionally competent in the host environment.

The term 'integration infrastructure' is introduced in this article to enhance the understanding of the role of migration infrastructure in settling into a new country. According to Xiang and Lindquist (2014), migration infrastructure is continuously involved in facilitating, mediating, organizing and influencing integration processes post-arrival in destination countries. Drawing on a wider understanding of the integration processes in cross-border migration (Ager & Strang, 2008; Alba & Foner, 2015; Castles, 2010; Dörr & Faist, 1997; Faist, 1994), this paper

introduces the term integration infrastructure to explore how infrastructure operates in integration processes, utilizing the findings of the case studies conducted on Chinese students in Finland and Germany. I therefore argue that integration infrastructure can be understood as a part of a larger social infrastructure that utilizes the reproduction of knowledge, resources, facilities, laws and regulations in the society in question, which in turn conditions migrants' integration. Integration infrastructure can thus be seen to shape migrants' aspirations for integration and their future prospects of achieving it. Subsequently, by exploring how integration infrastructure conditions integration aspirations and processes, we gain a better understanding of integration itself. Essentially, this necessitates a re-orientation of our questioning about how the migrant influx produces integration infrastructure, to thinking about how integration infrastructure produces integration.

The role of integration infrastructure in facilitating newcomers' integration is particularly evident in non-Anglophone countries. While studying and working in non-Anglophone countries poses challenges for migrants due to the language barrier, highly skilled migrants and student migrants who are fluent in English may be able to adapt to local life by remaining in an international or English "bubble" without getting to know the local language. This is especially evident in the case of Finland, as foreign arrivals rarely speak Finnish and most Finns are able to speak English. Meanwhile, some forms of integration infrastructure are predominantly designed to facilitate the integration of refugees and family migrants, whereas highly skilled migrants and international students are often expected to mobilize the resources that they have access to, and to integrate by themselves (Heikkilä & Peltonen, 2002).

It should be noted that our core concepts - integration aspiration and integration infrastructure - do not comprise an equally weighted dyad. While integration aspiration refers to individual motivational factors, integration infrastructure is an analytical category that reflects particular understandings of how the integration process works through the myriad of institutions, actors, policies and regulations. Yet the friction between the two concepts arises from their very connectedness: they both relate to how integration is initiated, approached, experienced, sustained or interrupted. Later in this article I examine these two concepts in detail, starting with an investigation of the differences between weak and strong integration and the links between integration aspiration and integration infrastructure. This will be done by relating the concepts to the broader semantic field in which they are located.

To ascertain why some Chinese students wishing to remain in the host society did not manage to do so, this article systematically explores this phenomenon by examining the integration aspiration and integration infrastructure that promote or impede Chinese students' integration. The analysis of this article is based on qualitative fieldwork data collected from inter-

views with Chinese students in Finland and Germany between 2015 and 2016. It outlines key arguments and findings in five main sections. First, the article discusses the theoretical considerations from individual and structural perspectives of integration aspiration and integration infrastructure. After a section on background information and methodology, it explains the manifestation of this phenomenon in the Finnish and German contexts. It then explicates the possible negative implications to be drawn from data analysis. The article goes on to explore the causes of the phenomenon under discussion from individual and structural perspectives, examining the lack of aspiration for further integration, and inadequate, insufficient, or conflictual integration infrastructures. Through this, I argue, the crucial nexus between integration aspiration and integration infrastructure emerges as key to understanding the phenomenon under discussion. The article concludes with a discussion of the main findings and implications for future research.

2. Theoretical Considerations

2.1 Integration

Although integration has become a central topic in migration studies (Favell, 2001, 2010; Spencer & Cooper, 2006), it is increasingly criticized as a problematic concept due to its politicization - the domination of a practical approach over an analytical and theoretical one – and its inadequacy for dealing with an increasingly multi-cultural and diverse society (Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2018). Integration continues to be confused with assimilation through special policies and in the public debate or to be understood as the participation of immigrants in the life of the receiving society instead of migrants establishing relationships with their receiving societies while still maintaining their ethnic identity (Berry, 1997). In Germany, for instance, there is an increasing drive advocating the rejection of the term “integration” in favor of “participation” (Faist & Ulbricht, 2017).

However, the concept of integration still has its merits. First, integration still connotes a certain perception of social reality that “participation” does not. Faist and Ulbricht (2017) argue that “integration” has two dimensions: participation and belonging. Integration refers to communal relationships (*Vergemeinschaftung*), characterized by belongingness, the setting of boundaries, and the binary conceptualization of in-group members and outsiders. Participation has more to do with ‘associative relationships’ (*Vergesellschaftung*), through exercising civil, political, social and cultural rights and responsibilities. The processes underlying the formation of communal relationships are ambivalent, function as a socio-moral basis for

wide-ranging social integration on a national level, and constitute elements of culturalization or boundary formation along cultural lines. These dual consequences provide a fundamental starting point for analyses of participation of migrants and non-migrants.

Alba and Foner (2015, pp. 4-5) summarized the two main mechanisms that appear to foster integration. The first mechanism highlights the 'parity of chances', meaning those that improve the access of migrants and their children to valuable social resources, such as income or education, and that promote greater equality between migrant and native groups. The second mechanism emphasizes 'full membership', meaning the process of migrants becoming part of the enlarged membership circle in the host national community, which encompasses the migrants and their descendants avoiding being marginalized as "them", in contrast to the "us" of the majority group. Thus full integration implies parity of life chances with members of the native majority group, as well as recognition as a legitimate part of the national community (Alba & Foner, 2015).

In this research, integration can be understood from the migrant and the host community/society perspectives. From the host community/society perspectives, integration refers to the process or endeavor through which the migrants become part of the enlarged membership circle in the host community, while maintaining their ethnic and cultural heritage. It also means 'having the sense of dignity and belonging that comes with acceptance and inclusion in a broad range of societal institutions' (Alba & Foner, 2015, p. 1). From the migrants' perspectives, integration pertains to the process or state of development of the migrants' capability (or ability) to pursue their aspirations in the host society, and to improve upon life chances to gain access to valuable social resources. When it comes to social relations, they have established relatively robust relationships with the host community without necessarily abandoning their home community and ethnic identity. Integration refers to a situation in which migrants have attained at least a moderate level of host society language proficiency and the cultural competence necessary in their country of settlement to ensure their chances of thriving. In addition, successful integration also means that the newcomer is actively trying to become a part of the surrounding society.

On the other hand, this article identifies the different states between 'strong integration' and 'weak integration'. For the purposes of this research, 'strong integration' signifies a more advanced state of an immigrant's entry into the host society than weak integration. Weak integration is defined as the preliminary level of integration. From migrants' perspectives, it means that the migrants have not yet developed sufficient capabilities to pursue their aspirations in the host society. They have gained some but not the same educational and/or work opportunities, and access to valued social resources as the long-term native-born citizens. It

indicates that the migrants have not yet reached parity of life chances with the native majority group. From the perspective of the host community/society the migrants are not yet recognized as a legitimate part of the national community. This refers to a state in which the migrants are potentially still lacking the language fluency, cultural competence and social relations with the host majority group, and/or face some forms of discrimination or exclusion that prevents them from gaining parity of life chances with members of the native majority group or from being recognized as a legitimate part of the national community.

The reason for differentiating between strong and weak integration is that many students, and possibly other migrants, may reach the stage of weak integration and remain there for years. This phenomenon may be due to structural barriers that cannot be easily be overcome despite the best efforts of the migrants. It may also be due to a lack of aspiration for further integration or inadequate support from the integration infrastructure, which I will explain later in the text.

2.2. Integration Aspiration

What is integration aspiration? What are the psychological processes at work? How is it related to the “weak integration trap”? In the migration literature much of the research addresses the challenges, processes and outcomes of integration among various migrant groups (e.g. (Dörr & Faist, 1997; Phillimore, Humphris, & Khan, 2018; Rienties et al., 2014)) as well as migration aspiration (Carling, 2014; Carling & Collins, 2018b; Carling & Schewel, 2018), but less attention has been paid to the aspiration toward integration.

Integration aspiration is therefore conceptualized in several interrelated ways.

First, integration aspiration is an interplay between the migrants’ own characteristics and the characteristics of the place. As noted by Jorgen and Schewel (2018), the value of living in a specific place depends on both the characteristics of that place, and its interplay with the individuals’ needs and preferences. The host society is an important part of the living environment, especially as regards the local socio-cultural environment, living atmosphere, economic and political situations and welcoming attitude towards the migrants. The migrants’ spatial preferences and geographical imaginaries only come into contact with reality when they arrive and begin living in the destination country. The interplay between the characteristics of the place and the migrants’ own characteristics and preferences will ultimately shape the migrants’ well-being, trajectories of integration and impact on the migrant’s willingness to make the necessary efforts to integrate or not. In addition, it is not only a matter of where and

how the migrants adapt and integrate, but also, of who integrates. If the migrants cannot imagine themselves living in the current host society in the long term, they are likely to lack integration aspiration.

Second, integration aspiration may be perceived as a comparison of places, especially regarding the comparative socio-economic and socio-political situations that provide opportunities for the migrants' personal and career future prospects. Individuals' notions of their own future prospects are largely dependent on a socio-culturally and economic existing entity that allows them to fulfil particular expectations. The socio-economic situation in one place among others and shapes the migrants' potential capabilities to earn a living and build their future careers. If, for instance, the glass ceiling for career development is too strong for the non-native populations, or the attitude against recruiting people of migrant background prevails within that culture, this will definitely undoubtedly have a negative impact on the migrants' future prospects, and subsequently on their aspirations for further integration.

Third, this may be examined from life-course perspectives. The timing of migration may affect how other events are experienced and how further life courses unfold (Wingens, Windzio, Valk, & Aybek, 2011, p. 288). Whether the migrant is currently in the life stage of planning to settle down, developing a stable relationship and building a family unit, or still at an age of seeking adventure, exploration and experience, has decisive impacts on integration aspiration. After arrival in the receiving country the outcomes of incorporation processes are closely linked to the various factors emphasized in the sociological life course approach, such as transitions, path-dependence, timing, sequencing, etc. (Wingens et al., 2011, p. 284).

2.3. Integration Infrastructure

While past research has acknowledged that a lack of appropriate infrastructure may inhibit the integration processes of newly arrived migrants (Waxman, 2001), what can we gain from conceptualizing integration infrastructure? How does integration infrastructure affect Chinese students' integration processes and outcomes?

A recent surge of literature on migration infrastructure and migration industries has widened our understanding of the infrastructures that facilitate migration. In particular, it positions migration as "constituted by a multitude of activities, practices, and technologies that must be considered in specific contexts" (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014, p. s143). It leads us to consider the journeys and trajectories of migration through both public and private agencies, as well as the actors who promote, facilitate and organize the processes of migration (Spaan & Hillmann, 2013, p. 64). Although it is acknowledged that migration infrastructure and/or migra-

tion industries do not only involve ‘moving’ the migrants but are also heavily engaged in all phases of migration processes (Hernández-León, 2005, 2013; Sorensen & Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2013; Spener), much less scholarly work has addressed how migration infrastructures have affected migrants’ lives after their arrival in their destination countries, especially during their integration processes.

Integration infrastructure draws inspiration from migration infrastructure theory. However, since migration may be fragmented and short-lived, migration infrastructure tends to be more instrumental in conditioning migrant mobility. Integration, however, is a longitudinal process that is constantly mediated, influenced, and structured by integration infrastructure, and which in return shapes the development of integration infrastructure. While political rhetoric tends to politicize integration as instrumental and interest-driven, I argue that integration, in essence, should benefit not only the migrants’ own development but also add to the cohesion and solidarity of the host society. Thus, integration infrastructure can be understood not only from a processual and longitudinal perspective, but also from the interactive system perspective, where the multi-dimensional myriad of constitutions facilitate or condition how integration is initiated, sustained and developed.

Apparently, migrant life and the effects of migration do not stop after arrival in the destination country. Migrants are continually involved in a set of infrastructures that may facilitate or hinder them, but which in any case have a major impact on their integration. Integration infrastructure is defined as a set of institutions, human and non-human actors, policies and regulations that facilitate or influence the migrants’ integration aspirations, goals, processes, strategies and outcomes. Integration infrastructure can be broadly divided into those that are designed specifically to facilitate integration, or what is not deliberately structured to facilitate integration, but which nevertheless has an impact on migrant integration.

Following Xiang and Lindquist (2014), this article divides integration infrastructure into six dimensions: educational (language and skills training), governmental (state labor or social welfare institutions), regulatory infrastructure (immigration laws and policies for residence permits and citizenship, home country diaspora policies), social (migrant networks), commercial (intermediaries and brokerage, companies), and technological (communication and technological tools). Most of the dimensions of the analysis are derived from those developed by Xiang and Lindquist (2014). However, educational infrastructure is specific to integration infrastructure, and pertains to the education institutions that provide language and skills training for migrants in order to facilitate better integration. The seven conceptual divisions of integration infrastructure are closely related, and they interact with and influence each other. However, each still has its own *modus operandi*, differentiated function and unique impact on

different aspects of migrants' integration processes. In relation to Chinese student migration and integration processes in Germany and Finland, integration infrastructure can facilitate or hinder the migrant students' integration aspirations, processes, and outcomes.

3. Data and Methods

This case study is based on fieldwork research on Chinese students in Finland and Germany conducted between 2015 and 2016. The project included cyclical stages of theory building and fieldwork research, inspired by the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Interview was chosen as the research method, as it offers a powerful and flexible method for collecting data, while still allowing the researcher to flexibly investigate the topic and gather more in-depth information than can be achieved through surveys (Wu, 2015). The purpose of the interviews in this study was to enable students to think deeply about the topic, to talk freely about it, and to verbally construct and convey their social world (Silverman, 2006).

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 mainland Chinese tertiary-level degree students in Finland and 28 Chinese students in Germany. However, since this research focused on the integration aspirations and experiences of the Chinese students into both the academic and societal contexts, the data analysis excluded those interviewees who were determined to leave their current host country upon completing their studies. Finally, the data analysis only included interviews with 18 students in Finland and 23 students in Germany, who stated their preference to stay in the host society after graduation, or those who were not sure about their plans but were not opposed to staying in the host country.

Two methods were used to recruit interviewees. Firstly, the international offices of HEIs in Finland and Germany were approached with a request to send an invitation to all enrolled mainland Chinese students in their universities. Students who volunteered to participate in the research were contacted by the researcher through email, instant message, or by phone. Secondly, snowball sampling was used. The research participants were encouraged to distribute the invitation letter among their friends to recruit more participants for this research study. Permission to collect data from the research participants was applied for and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region and Maastricht University.

The two main types of Finnish and German universities were covered: universities and universities of applied sciences. Approximately half of the interviews in Finland were conducted in the Finnish city of Tampere, where two international universities and one UAS (polytechnic

university) are situated. The rest of the interviews were conducted with students from other major Finnish cities: Helsinki, Espoo, Turku, Joensuu, and Oulu. While most of the interviews in Germany were conducted in Bielefeld, Paderborn and Düsseldorf, a few of the interviews did take place with Chinese students in Berlin, Munich and Leipzig.

The group of respondents included students from a wide variety of backgrounds in terms of gender, age, major subject, previous work and study experience, duration of residence and current location in Finland and Germany. Among the interviewees from Finland, 10 were female and 8 were male. These interviewees were enrolled on bachelor's, master's or doctoral programmes in various fields, such as computer science, business management, etc. Two of the master's students were working full-time while completing their master's studies on a part-time basis. Among the interviewees in Germany, 10 were female and 13 were male. All participants were in their twenties with an average age of 24 years for female and 26 for male students. The interviewees came from various academic backgrounds: five were studying natural sciences, eight social sciences, five mechanical engineering, five medicine, seven computer science, one psychology, three sports management, four arts and humanities, two German linguistics and one English literature.

The interviewees included students who were studying in Finland or Germany for just one semester and students who had been residing in the respective countries for more than five years. As the duration of study and integration phases of the interviewees were diverse, the authors were able to explore which features of integration manifest in the different phases since their move abroad. Students who had moved to Finland or Germany recently had the fresh experience of 'culture shock', while the senior students gave lively accounts of how they had managed to overcome integration problems in different stages and reflected on their personal development trajectories. This captured a wide variety of pervasive themes in order to represent core or central experiences in different themes (Patton, 1987). This enabled internal generalization based on interview analysis as well as the possible transferability of the theoretical developments to other cases (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014).

The interviews, which lasted between one to three hours, were conducted in Mandarin Chinese by the first author. The shared language and cultural background facilitated communication between the interviewer and the interviewees (Welch & Piekkari, 2006). While a list of interview questions was used for all interviews, flexibility and spontaneity were preserved by asking follow-up questions in response to the Chinese students' accounts. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, anonymized, and encoded in Atlas.ti using substantive (Kelle, 2010) and theoretical coding (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Citations from the interviews conducted in Mandarin Chinese were translated into English by the first author.

In presenting the findings, no personal data will be revealed from which the participants may be identified. The anonymity of the respondents is protected by using only their gender, their major subject at university and their country of residence to characterize them.

4. What is the Weak Integration Trap

An interesting phenomenon emerged from the interviews: in some cases, the students had managed to adapt to day-to-day life in the host society, and to fulfill the basic study requirements of the university. However, once they reached the level of managing their daily and study lives, they begin to invest very little effort, or in some cases, no effort at all to improve their proficiency in the host language. They mainly interacted with co-national communities or home country networks transnationally. Many interviewees acknowledged the fact that it is important to try to learn or improve their local language proficiency to integrate but explained that they had been frustrated at the difficulty of the process and thus decided to focus on other more important aspects of their lives instead of proceeding with integration. I call this phenomenon the weak integration trap.

The weak integration trap occurs when migrants have acquired the capability to manage their day-to-day lives in the host society. They may have established some networks with host-nationals as well as internationals and co-nationals, hold a job (such as working as a researcher during their doctoral studies), or may even be married to a host-national. However, they have not yet gained the same educational and work opportunities as long-term native-born citizens. In addition, they have not yet gained a sense of dignity and belonging or of acceptance as full members of the host society.

For first-generation migrants, such as the Chinese students in this research, who arrive in the host society after adolescent years, becoming stuck in the 'weak integration trap' was largely due to their limited proficiency in the host language. Becoming fluent in a foreign language requires tremendous effort and the language acquisition facility naturally declines after the human brain reaches adulthood (Long, 1990). This raises the question of whether full integration is considered an ideal state, especially considering that the majority of migrants will reach a certain plateau of integration after many years of residence in the host society. Clearly, more interviewees stayed in the weak integration trap in Finland than in Germany due to host-language issues. In addition, whether the migrants are welcomed or not is another important factor in their integration since in some contexts the structural barrier may be

so strong that despite the migrants' best efforts, it is still not possible to become fully accepted members of the host society.

There are different nuances between weak integration trap manifested in the Finnish case and the German case, as emerged from our data analysis. In the Finnish case, almost all the interviewees had come to study in Finland on English-taught programmes. They strove to improve their fluency in English in order to cope in their academic or working lives while learning the basics of the local language to facilitate their daily lives. The students were able to complete their studies, cope in their daily lives, and even find internships or job opportunities due to their proficiency in English. However, not being able to become fluent in Finnish also prevented them from accessing many of the resources and opportunities in academic or societal contexts. Many interviewees admitted that if they wanted to stay and live in Finland, it would be necessary to study and become fluent in Finnish. However, in reality, hardly any of the interviewees had managed to acquire fluency in Finnish.

The weak integration trap manifested differently in Germany. In Germany, the authors found that the majority of Chinese students were studying on programmes taught in German, with some students studying on programmes taught in English. The Chinese students on programmes taught in English faced the same situation as the students in Finland due to the language barrier. Students on programmes taught in English more often stayed in the 'international bubble', and were stuck in the weak integration trap.

I went for a research group meeting organized by my supervisor, and from the beginning, they were speaking in German because I am the only one who does not speak German there. I felt really embarrassed and awkward sitting there, feeling like a deaf person all by myself (Female, Sociology, Germany).

I need to do research, I need to apply for research funding, I need to write and publish articles, and meanwhile I need to learn German. Sometimes they just hold many faculty meetings in German so that I do not understand anything, especially when they begin to speak very fast (Female, law, Germany).

The students who studied on programmes taught in German faced another set of problems. German was often the second foreign language that they had studied for a number of years before coming to study in Germany. However, the students often had many difficulties in understanding teaching content, fulfilling academic requirements, engaging in class and conversing with native speakers, which led to problems with their studies and/or finding internships or job opportunities in the host society. Many Chinese students confessed that they had failed many courses at the beginning of their studies, although they had hardly ever failed any classes when they were in China.

Being able to pass the DSH test and gaining the right to study is a totally different thing from understanding the teaching content. In the beginning, I could only understand 40 percent of the teaching content, around 30 – 40 percent. For some difficult subjects, even less than 30-40 percent. Even if you taught me in Chinese I wouldn't be able to understand everything. I just felt like I am stupid, and I needed to study by myself after the class. In the end, if I could see the class material in advance, I could understand 80 percent of the class. I think 80 percent (of all the teaching content) is the maximum that I can understand until the end of my studies. (Male, Electronic engineering, Germany).

I think in China when we study German as a language, But when we come here, German is no longer a study subject, but a tool for you to understand the content. This requires not only the development of language proficiency, but also adapting to the new way of learning and thinking. (Female, German Linguistics, Germany)

5. What are the Implications of the 'Weak Integration Trap'

From the interview analysis, I summarized three implications of Chinese students becoming stuck in the 'weak integration trap'.

First, being stuck in "weak integration trap" can lead to a feeling of alienation in the host academic or societal environment. This may cause the students to lack a sense of belonging, or to experience feelings of loneliness and social isolation. A lack of a deeper connection to or understanding of the host society may also cause the students to feel insecure, as expressed by some of the interviewees.

When I was doing my internship, whenever the company had a meeting, I would not be able to say anything at all. Because everyone else would be speaking Finnish. I would be feeling like a deaf mute. I can't feel others are acknowledging my existence in the company. Before long, I feel like my time in this company is limited. (Male, computer science, Finland)

I think I lack a sense of security here (Germany). After coming here for about a year, I rarely pay attention to the German news. I just know the basic things, for instance the migration issues. I cannot follow other things, such as local news, the general situation of the culture, society and politics in Germany. [...] This is basically due to the language barrier (Male, Music Technology, Germany).

I feel very lonely, very lonely. I think one reason is because of the weather. It is very cold. Not only cold, but also always dark, with no sunlight. For me, I have some depression. Sometimes good, sometimes bad. It is not bad to the degree that I would commit suicide. But I feel uncomfortable. I have a lot of struggles. During the most serious period, I was crying every day. I don't know why I was crying, I just wanted to cry. (Female, supply chain management, Finland)

One of the interviewees who had managed to avoid the 'weak integration trap' by acquiring excellent language skills, joining the student union and participating in various social activities, said in her interview that escaping the 'weak integration trap' required students to take the initiative to learn about and interact with the host society. Being proactive in increasing their interaction with the host society benefitted the students' own personal development,

enriched their extracurricular lives, and ultimately helped them to achieve their academic goals.

If I never had taken part-time jobs, never had joined the student union and organized so many events, I would never have known so much about Germany and German society. I think many people (international or Chinese students) they just come here, and invest all their time in study or research, and then go home. Although they might have a good academic result, I still think they have lost a very good opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the host society, access many social resources, since they only see the surface of the society, or not even the surface. They only know the buildings are nicely built, the pavements are well paved, but they don't really know the local people and the local social reality. [...] The things I did outside of my academic work, in the end, helped with the improvement of my language skills. After my language improved, I also learned things much faster and was capable of knowing and understanding a lot more issues. This is really a mutually complementary process. (Female, Sociology, Germany)

Second, for some of the interviewees, being stuck in the 'weak integration trap' might lead to difficulties in or failure to complete their studies in the host society. As discussed, for the students studying on programmes taught in German, inadequate language skills for understanding teaching content might be a huge barrier to the completion of studies. Students on programmes taught in English faced the same issues. Besides, lacking social contact with the host society might slow down the process of improving their language skills, getting to know the local academic and social environment and becoming more and more independent.

One of the interviewees explained her understanding of three stages of the learning transformation that she thinks the Chinese students should go through during their studies abroad. She said she witnessed some of the Chinese students being stuck in the first level of learning transformation, that of understanding course content, and that caused some students to abandon their studies to return home.

I think there are three stages of learning transformation processes. I think in the first stage, often at bachelor's level, we are in the stage of understanding the content. Then, in the second stage, we need to develop our critical thinking to look at things critically, to discuss in the classroom. [...] In the third stage, we need not only to critically look at an issue but also to try to develop it. I think this process is not something you can achieve in one or two days, or in one or two weeks. It takes a long time for you to re-adjust and adapt to the new environment to reach a stage that you can critically review the things (you learned). This is an enlightenment process. Moreover, we don't have this process in China (Chinese education). Some people already got lost in the first stage because they could not understand what the university was teaching [...]. Some people then stopped going to classes, stopped going to exams, escaping from reality, staying at home and not going out. Then they decided to return to China without achieving anything. In the end, they never got out of this quagmire. (Female, Medicine, Germany)

Finally, becoming stuck in the ‘weak integration trap’ may prevent students from remaining in the host society after graduation because they are unable to find suitable job opportunities or to continue their education. Many jobs in Finland require the participants to have a good command of Finnish to apply. Many Chinese students can only apply for job positions that allow them to work in English. The same goes for Germany, where many jobs require applicants to have a good command of German to even apply. In addition, having a good network, which can be built during their studies in the host society, can also be very important in helping students to find a job. One of the interviewees explained the importance of having a network in the host society for the students’ social lives and future career opportunities in the host society:

Overall, being stuck in the ‘weak integration trap’ can be seen to have a negative impact on both the Chinese students themselves and the host societies. For the students themselves, this may lead to unfulfilled potential in their study and work areas and restrict access to many valuable resources in both academic and social environments. Academically, it can lead to difficulties in understanding the course, or failure to complete their studies. Economically, lack of proficiency in the host language and/or of a professional social network can add to the difficulty of finding a job in the host society. Socially and culturally, the difficulties in making friends with the host-national and internationals might lead to the students to mainly seek to belong among and interact with the Chinese diaspora. Ultimately, becoming stuck in the ‘weak integration trap’ can lead to students wishing to stay in the host society eventually failing to do so. For the host society, this means the loss of potential highly skilled workforce which it is considered desirable to retain.

6. What Causes the Weak Integration Trap?

6.1 Lack of Aspiration to Further Integration

The interview analysis showed that one of the main reasons why the students were stuck in the ‘weak integration trap’ was that they lacked aspirations for further integration. The students’ aspiration for integration was often the result of interaction between their intrinsic composition and the characteristics of the place. I summarized three factors that contributed to the Chinese students’ lack of aspiration for further integration as follows:

The Comfort zone effect

First, many interviewees realized the importance and the benefits for further integration, but found excuses not to make the effort, or lacked the perseverance to do so. I called this phenomenon the ‘comfort zone effect’. Many Chinese students, either in Germany or in Finland, stopped trying to improve their host language skills or English language skills after reaching a level where they were able to manage their daily lives. Often, they also interacted mainly with a group of Chinese students instead of reaching out to build a wider network with people from the host society. This is more evident in the Finnish case, as many Finnish people, especially in higher education environments, speak good English. While the students can lead their academic or daily lives, being stuck in the ‘weak integration trap’ still prevents them from accessing valuable educational and social resources. Although they themselves often acknowledge the barrier, they have not yet invested sufficient systematic effort to become more integrated.

I think many Chinese students prefer to stay in the Chinese student communities, engage less with the host nationals, and make less effort at learning Finnish because it is very comfortable. It is a comfort zone for them. (Male, Computer science, Finland).

If you go to study abroad, but are still surrounded only by Chinese every day, you spend your daily life with Chinese, watching Chinese TV shows. Naturally your English improves very little after you finish your studies, not to mention your local language skills. (Male, Chemistry, Germany)

If I don't speak Finnish, it will not be possible to integrate. Why don't Finnish companies want to hire foreigners? Because if you don't speak any Finnish, it will bring significant changes to their working environment, so that they need to switch to English just so that you will understand. That is why the employment rate of foreigners is particularly low. (Female, Business Administration, Finland)

One interviewee stressed the importance of becoming independent from the Chinese student community as one of the key for steps to becoming independent and thus more integrated into the host society:

I think that if you want to stay here, you have to be a very independent person. You need to have your own independent thinking, instead of always relying on the (Chinese student) community. Because this place is such that only those who are outstanding can manage to stay. It is a place for the selected few. How can you become one of the selected few? You need to slowly leave the Chinese student community. I think that if you want to stay here, you have to be a very independent person. You need to have your own independent thinking, instead of always relying on the (Chinese student) community. Because this place is such that only those who are outstanding can manage to stay. It is a place for the selected few. How can you become one of the selected few? You need to slowly leave the Chinese student community. I am not saying that you need to become eccentric, that you do things even though you know it is wrong. But you need to persist in the things that are worth your perseverance, and then you slowly become outstanding. (Male, information science, Finland).

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Professional skill is more important than language

Second, some interviewees considered it more important to acquire professional skills that would be more valued in the labor market than learning the local language, knowing the local culture, or making more friends with local people. As long as they are able to find a job and make a living, they would prefer to stay in their comfort zone in other areas.

Some of the interviewees thought that acquiring a skill that made them competitive in the job market could be more important in helping them to have a good career was more useful than learning the local language. This was more evident in the case of Finland than in Germany. One of the interviewees, who first came to study as a bachelor's student and stayed in the host society for six years, explained this:

I don't speak good Finnish. I had no such idea (of learning Finnish) ever since the beginning. I think that Finnish is a language spoken by a small ethnic group. It is not really helpful for you even if you learned it. I am a computer programmer, why should I learn Finnish? I don't think it is useful. I still think so today. It is probably better to learn and speak good English (Male, computer science, Finland).

If you are not sure whether you will stay here long-term, there is no need to study Finnish, especially for those of us doing things related to technology. For we can communicate on a technical level with computer codes, so that even with a person who doesn't speak English, it is possible to communicate. [...] But, if I really decide to stay permanently, I really need to learn Finnish. (Male, computer science, Finland)

Doubtful about permanent stay

Among the interviewees who intended to stay or were considering staying in their host societies, two reasons contributed to their doubts about their decision to remain permanently in the host societies. One issue was family reunification obstacles. Many interviewees mentioned that their choice to return to China was to be reunited with their families or to be close to their families. Many of the interviewees come from the one-child generation of urban middle-class families. In Chinese culture it is often expected that the children will take care of their elderly parents, rather than sending their parents to nursing homes. Thus, even for those who would like to stay, one of their major concerns was also how they would take care

of their families should they decide to live abroad in the long term. This can be evidenced in the following interview excerpts:

Even if you decided to stay somewhere, it is still very hard to bring your family with you. Even if they come, they will have a hard time adapting to the new life. However, if I return now I would not have a great career expectation in China either. (Male, Mechanical Engineering, Germany)

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

The second external factor was job related. Naturally, the aspiration to remain in the country was often directly related to whether the students could find jobs there after graduation. With the advances in modern technology, many interviewees said that they would apply for jobs not only in the country where they were currently residing, but also within the EU, China or in North America. For most, the employment prospects of their current fields of study were their primary concern. As one interviewee said:

If I have the chance I would prefer to stay in Germany. But the reality is what you can offer so that the employer would prefer to hire you over a German. I think my advantage is that I know a lot about China (...). (Male, Sports Management, Germany)

6.2. Integration Infrastructure and the Weak Integration Trap

Besides the lack of aspiration for further integration, this research finds that inadequate, inconsistent or conflictual integration infrastructure also contributes to Chinese students being stuck in the 'weak integration trap'. From the interview analysis, I identified three ways that integration infrastructure can influence Chinese students' integration processes so as to indirectly cause them to be stuck in the 'weak integration trap'.

Lack of support from integration infrastructure

The research found that Chinese students do indeed receive help with their integration processes from the university and from society. However, there are still many ways in which the

integration infrastructure could be improved to help the students overcome the danger of becoming trapped in the 'weak integration trap' and to become better integrated.

For instance, the Chinese students interviewed often needed to improve their language skills. The universities could provide more language learning support beyond those related to passing the language test so as to help international students better develop their ability to use English or the host language in academic settings, and to help them to study more efficiently.

Second, the universities might arrange more activities that offer alternative opportunities for students to socialize. For many Chinese students, going drinking or partying was not the usual way in which they were used to meeting new people or to learn about the host society. Universities should offer a greater variety of opportunities for students to learn about the culture and be better able to establish networks with the local people, and to find internships and job opportunities.

I think the cultural difference may manifest in different forms of entertainment and socialization. For example, like going to parties. In the beginning, I would still go to some parties, but later I didn't go any more than two to three times a year. For me this is a great pressure and challenge. I cannot be like them, that after studying for a whole day I can enjoy going there to relax. This is not a form of relaxation for me, because I need to learn how to relax first. First, I don't really know how to dance, and don't know how to speak and get to know people whom I don't know at all. I have already spoken and studied German for a whole day, I don't want to speak German any more, or talk about subjects that I am not really interested in. Not to mention different forms of entertainment that we were used to at home. (Female, German linguistics, Germany)

Residence permit extension policies allow international graduates to stay for approximately a year (Finland) or 18 months (Germany) while looking for work. However, according to EU and local laws, local employers should prioritize hiring host-nationals or EU citizens over non-EU/EEA citizens (Kahanec & Zimmermann, 2011). Despite the positive incentives for host countries such as Finland and Germany to retain international graduates, such regulations are in conflict with their policy incentives, which leads to greater barriers for non-EU/EEA Chinese students to finding jobs and staying on after graduation.

Uneven distribution

Finally, the uneven distribution of integration infrastructure across different migrant groups is another contributive factor. Increasing the flow of migrants to developed EU countries led to a flourishing development of integration infrastructures, especially governmental and educational integration infrastructures intended to facilitate better integration. However, most of the

governmental or educational integration infrastructure is directed primarily towards assisting in the integration of refugees, family migrants or other categories of unemployed migrants ((Heikkilä & Peltonen, 2002; Joppke, 2011). Highly skilled migrants and student migrants are often expected to integrate by themselves, as they are often viewed as highly educated and highly mobile (Chaloff & Lemaitre, 2009). They are also expected to have fewer issues with integration compared to low-skilled migrants. However, this research shows that such is often not the case. Studying abroad may be a deliberate strategy adopted by Chinese students planning for long-term migration. Without intensive language training and integration courses the Chinese students may stay in the weak integration trap for many years without acquiring host language proficiency or getting to know the host society. This example of the ‘weak integration trap’ among Chinese students shows that highly skilled migrants may actually be less integrated than other migrant groups, which are often the targets of integration infrastructure. This research therefore calls for more integration infrastructure resources to be allocated to help with highly skilled or semi-highly skilled (international students) migrants’ integration.

7. Conclusion

This article contributes to the existing knowledge by demonstrating how the interplay between integration aspiration and integration infrastructure can result in Chinese students becoming stuck in the ‘weak integration trap’. This was demonstrated through a case study of Chinese students and their integration in Finland and Germany.

It is necessary to acknowledge the relativity of integration aspiration and integration infrastructure regarding their functions in the migrants’ integration processes. The integration aspiration/infrastructure theory prompts us to reconsider integration in four ways:

First, despite claims to replace ‘integration’ with ‘participation’ in society, and accusations of integration becoming increasingly politicized and ignoring the increasingly diverse and multicultural world (Faist & Ulbricht, 2017), this article argues that integration still offers an analytical framework for understanding how migrants become part of the host society without imposing upon it criteria or thresholds. Integration can be understood as migrants obtaining equal opportunity to access valuable educational and social resources, and to become accepted as members of the host society. While integration is a socially constructed concept and vulnerable to the social dynamics in our multifaceted and interconnected world, we still need to acknowledge that there are certain barriers that migrants must overcome to become

contributing and accepted members of a society. These barriers include learning the host language, building networks and understanding the social fabric of their 'new home' through institutional, social and cultural perspectives. In addition, while political rhetoric may address integration as processual operations or threshold benchmarking, integration is a longitudinal process with a profound impact on the migrants and their host societies. It is influenced by a variety of factors including the timing of migration, the family situations in migrants' home and host countries, etc. These factors affect the migrants' decisions to stay on or to return, to invest efforts for further integration or stay in the 'weak-integration trap'. In sum, integration is a meaningful concept that provides context and guidance for explaining or formulating hypotheses about approaching migrant incorporation into host societies.

Second, integration should not be seen as a linear trajectory, but as a perilous journey that is driven by integration aspiration and mediated and conditioned by integration infrastructure. This study proposes making a distinction between strong and weak integration. The distinction between strong and weak integration leads us to think about the dynamics of transition between different states among migrants, and the causes and consequences of the 'weak-integration trap'. To better understand the processes and dynamics of integration and the mechanisms that have resulted in some migrants getting stuck in the 'weak-integration trap', integration aspiration and integration infrastructure offer methodological tools that drive the analysis of the multi-faceted phenomenon of integration in an increasingly diverse and multicultural society. Since migrants have different aspirations towards integration, those choosing to remain are distinguished by whether they aspire towards full integration or prefer to stay in the stage of weak integration. These aspirations may be facilitated, influenced or conditioned by a range of integration infrastructures including large or small, public or private, human or non-human, educational institutions, bureaucrats, policies, regulations and technologies. This enables the adoption of a new perspective on understanding the drivers, challenges and strategies while describing and analyzing integration.

Third, to understand integration as both process and result, it is important to consider integration aspiration and integration infrastructure together as interactive constituents that constantly shape and influence each other. In relation to Chinese students' integration in Finland and Germany, lacking the aspiration for further integration and adequate support from integration infrastructure has resulted in many students getting stuck in a 'weak integration trap'. a 'weak integration trap' occurs when Chinese students have integrated into the general aspects of their academic and social lives, but still lack access to some valuable educational or social resources and have yet to become full members of their host society. Lack of aspiration for further integration often prevents Chinese students from progressing beyond the

stage of 'weak integration'. Furthermore, the development of integration infrastructure facilitates students' integration. However, if the aspiration for further integration is missing, or if the integration infrastructure is unevenly distributed or mutually conflicting, it may still lead to students becoming trapped in the stage of 'weak integration'. It is in this process that we can understand the paradox of the increasing levels of complication related to migrant integration.

Fourth, we need to collectively and inter-relationally examine the interactions between the different dimensions of integration infrastructure that have an influence on migrants' integration aspirations and processes. This research shows how many Chinese students' aspiration to remain long-term or permanently in the host society can be inhibited by structural barriers. This calls for more understanding and research into the coherence of the different dimensions of integration infrastructure. Moreover, this research shows how the inconsistent and unsynchronized integration infrastructure may leave many Chinese students stuck in the 'weak integration trap', inhibiting them from staying on in the host society after graduation. It calls for more scholarly and public attention to integration infrastructure developed to better support international students' or highly skilled migrants' integration to prevent them from staying in the 'weak integration' trap.

Integration aspiration and integration infrastructure enable an understanding of integration because of the interplay between these two concepts. In addition, it also provides an analytical lens for advancing future migration research and for understanding societal transformation more widely. The conundrums of integration challenges, especially among international students or highly skilled migrants as seen within this case study, are further complicated by the demographic transition and recent competition for international talents that have changed attitudes towards retaining skilled migrants in many developed countries. There is thus a need for more research on how best to retain and integrate international tertiary students in non-Anglophone countries, such as Finland and Germany. Future research on the convolution and interaction between integration aspiration and integration infrastructure (e.g. by testing how applicable the weak integration trap is across different migrant groups and different contexts), may refine the sociological and statistical analysis across various contextualizations of integration, explain the varied integration aspirations and uneven distribution of integration infrastructure across different migrant groups and host countries, and help to gain new insights on migration and integration in its contemporary form.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests

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