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CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF INTERCULTURAL FRIENDSHIPS WITH NEW ZEALAND DOMESTIC STUDENTS

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Abstract

Cultural differences create differences in the perceptions of friendship. This study examined friendship formation of 136 Chinese international students studying in New Zealand. The students provided a range of descriptions on the notion of friendship. The results indicated that there were benefits associated with intercultural friendships. The students perceived the benefits of intercultural friendships to be centred on learning the culture, language, and values leading to the integration into the local community. Having intercultural friends expanded the students' social networks and support to provide an enriching experience of studying abroad. Intercultural friendships highlighted potential differences in the culture, language, and values that may lead to misunderstandings. Wright's (1978) theory of friendship is used as a premise that friendships require the voluntary interaction of individuals and that friendships include how individuals interpret each other. As the interpretation of friendship varies across cultures, it is important to explore the implications this has on Chinese international students studying in New Zealand. This study thus also raises the question of whether there should be support from higher education institutions with regards to students' social and cultural adaptation in a host country.

Introduction

With a spiralling increase in globalisation, mobility becomes more effortless and more people travel around the world for a myriad of reasons, including studying abroad. An OECD (2013) report shows that 4.3 million students attend tertiary education outside their home country. According to the Ministry of Education (2011) in New Zealand, 45,638 international tertiary students constituted 10% of tertiary students enrolled with education providers in 2010. Of these students, the majority (72%) came from

Asia. Individuals invest time and money to study abroad, primarily to gain knowledge and improve career opportunities. In addition, many students want to experience new things, such as different cultures, expand their social life and make new friends. When transitioning to a new culture however, students have to make significant adjustments as they leave behind their families, friends and social supports. In many cases they need to learn how to function competently in a new environment with a new language and different cultural norms (Lowinger, He, Lin & Chang, 2014).

Studies focusing on intercultural contact in tertiary education have highlighted that international students want to and indeed expect to have contact and develop friendships with local or host students (Ramburuth, 2001; Smart, Volet, & Ang, 2000; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Researchers have conducted extensive studies on friendship formation between international and domestic students. These studies have considered the quality and quantity of friendship patterns (Ward, 2001), cross-cultural contact (Adler & Proctor, 2011), and the functional roles of intercultural interactions (Gareis, 2000). Cultural differences produce differences in notions of friendship (Oetzel, 2009). Furthermore, studies have also been undertaken to look into the difficulties that Asian international students face when trying to build friendship with domestic students (Barnes, 2010; Ward, 2001). Factors that influence the formation of intercultural friendship, such as cultural differences, intercultural communication competence, personal characteristics, and language problems, have been researched (Barnes, 2010; Gareis, 2012). These factors can lead to difficulties with features of friendship including intimacy/closeness, companionship, social support, homophily and propinquity (similarity), all of which are considered the basis of forming a friendship (Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury, & Schneider, 2013).

Friendship can have a significant influence on individuals, as friends can boost our happiness, help increase our sense of belonging, improve our self-worth and generally contribute towards our well-being. Hendrickson, Devan and Aune (2011, p. 282) state that “friendship is an extremely important component for individuals in satisfying deep personal and emotional needs.” Friendship is universal across all cultures, yet the interpretation of what a friendship means varies from culture to culture (Liu, Volčič & Gallois, 2011) with varying connotations and implications.

As the interpretation of friendship varies across cultures, it is important to explore the implications this has on Chinese international students studying in New Zealand. This article focuses on the Chinese students’ notions of friendship, and the perceived benefits and barriers of forming intercultural friendships with New Zealand domestic students. As many Chinese international students struggle to make friends with domestic students, it is important to identify why this is the case and consider what higher education institutions could do to assist with the students’ socio-cultural adaptation, which includes the formation of friendships with domestic students.

Notions of friendship

Although there does not seem to be any absolutely agreed upon and socially acknowledged criteria for what constitutes a friend (Allan, 1996), in many Western societies, friendship tends to be generally interpreted as enjoying each other’s company, whereas, historically, friendships also had a utilitarian function (Doyle & Smith, 2002).

For some individuals, a friend is someone they can do things with together, like going shopping, watching movies, and enjoying a meal, for others a friend is someone with whom they can share their innermost emotions: happiness or sorrow, anger or joy. A friend could be a neighbour, a colleague at work, or someone an individual has met recently (Liu *et al.*, 2011). Patterson, Bettini, and Nussbaum (1993) identified nine definitional clusters of what it means to be a friend: commonality, understanding, familial comparison, frequent contact, positive attributions, positive impact, devotion, and reciprocity.

Wright (1978) postulated a theory of friendship which highlighted two important components to the formation of a friendship. Firstly, friendship involves voluntary interactions where individuals are willing to spend time together without external pressures or constraints. Their lives are intertwined and exhibit voluntary interdependence. Secondly, friendship involves how the other individual is interpreted or seen, where each individual reacts to the other individual with respect to their genuineness and uniqueness. Hence, according to Wright (1978), “friendship is a relationship involving voluntary interdependence in which the individuals respond to one another personalistically” (p. 199).

The notion of a friend may also refer to a number of different friendship types (Hays, 1988), such as close friends, casual friends, and acquaintances. The quality of interpersonal interactions largely depends on the type of relationship shared by two individuals (Baym, Zhang, & Lin, 2004). Close friendships involve high levels of interaction, intimacy, interdependence, and self-disclosure (Sillars & Scott, 1983). Berscheid and Peplau (1983) use terms such as “love, trust, commitment, caring, stability, attachment, one-ness, meaningful, and significant” (p. 12) to describe close friendships. Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, and Rainie (2006) believe that close friends are more interdependent and are very likely to share their innermost emotions and beliefs. Casual friends are more distanced from closeness and intimacy, and avoid disclosing too much personal information and deep feelings (Berger & Roloff, 1982). An acquaintance could be seen as someone you know in passing, and although some people do not regard acquaintances as friends, such a relationship may help to broaden social networks and may develop into casual friendships or even into close friendships.

Intercultural friendships

The notions of friendship are perceived differently in different cultures as relationship development is guided by cultural values and norms (Liu *et al.*, 2011). Cultures have different definitions and interpretations of friendships (Oetzel, 2009). To appreciate the intricacies of intercultural friendships, Kudo and Simkin (2003, p. 93) presented two perspectives relating to intercultural friendships. Firstly, “friendship varies from culture to culture in terms of spread, obligation, duration and mutual trust”, and secondly, “intercultural friendship is not experienced in the same ways as intracultural friendships”.

Individualism and collectivism are significant orientations that influence the formation and development of intercultural friendships. Ting-Toomey and Chung’s (2012) study showed that individualists tend to focus more on the personal desirable attributes of a potential friend, whereas collectivists focus more on social and

cultural attributes. A study by Gareis (2012) found that the low satisfaction levels of international students with the number and quality of their intercultural friendships were related to the college environment (for example, limited or no time to interact), their own difficulties (for example, a language problem), cultural differences, and the collectivist-individualist orientation. Williams and Johnson (2011) studied how students with and without international friends differed on multicultural personality characteristics, intercultural attitudes, and multicultural experiences. They found that individuals with international friends had higher levels of open-mindedness and lower levels of apprehension than those without international friends.

This research project is part of a multi-phase international project exploring friendship formation and maintenance between international students and domestic students. The first phase explored New Zealand students' perceptions of making friends with international students from different cultures (Vaccarino & Dresler-Hawke, 2011). The second phase examined the cultural understanding of the notion of friendship of domestic students in China and domestic students in New Zealand (Zhou, Vaccarino & Dresler, 2014). The present study examines Chinese international students' perceptions of friendship formation with New Zealand domestic students. The research questions formulated for this project were:

1. How do the Chinese international students describe the characteristics of friendship?
2. How do these descriptions influence their perceptions of the benefits and barriers to intercultural friendship formation?

Method

This study consisted of 136 Chinese international students aged between 18 and 35, of whom 60.5% were female and 39.5% were male. These students were based in Palmerston North and their stay in New Zealand varied: 38.8% had been here under 12 months; 27.9% had been here between 13 and 24 months; 15.5% between 25 and 36 months; and 17.8% over 36 months. For the purpose of this study, the definition of domestic and international students is in accordance with Section 159 of the Education Act 1989 of New Zealand which defines a domestic student as a New Zealand citizen; a holder of a residence class visa; or a person of a class or description of persons required by the Minister, to be treated as domestic students (Education.govt.nz, 2018). Students who are not within this definition are considered international students.

An online self-administered questionnaire using Qualtrics¹ was adopted to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. A link to the survey was sent via email to Chinese international students studying at Massey University, and it took 30 minutes to complete. The questionnaire was prepared in English and translated in Mandarin by the third author (who is a native speaker) to ensure that the participants had a clear understanding of the questions and responded with greater ease. The participants responded in Mandarin, and these responses were translated into English. The data

1 <http://www.qualtrics.com/>

were uploaded onto an SPSS (version 16.0) file for analysis. A descriptive analysis was used to analyse the quantitative data, and a thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. To maintain anonymity, a random number was assigned to each student, and this number is used in parenthesis after students' direct quotes.

Findings and Discussion

Firstly, students provided a description of what they considered to be a friend. Secondly, they commented on the benefits of developing and maintaining friends with New Zealand students. Thirdly, they identified any barriers they may encounter when developing friendships with New Zealand students whilst studying in New Zealand. This section presents these findings as well as a discussion on these topics.

Notions of friendship

A range of descriptions emerged from the responses, and these were analysed thematically, and are presented below. The central theme that emerged from the data was contact; which is an important and key characteristic of friendship. Without contact there can be no friendship. When referring to contact with domestic students, many Chinese students expressed that they had "no chance to know each other" (46, 87), or "very little chance to come into contact" with domestic students (40, 84, 114). Some students explained that there were "not many social events to meet them [domestic students]" (50). Further, some students felt that for whatever reason, they needed to be "very careful in the process of contact" (126). For other students, their contact was often restricted to the occasional greeting as they "don't know what to talk about" (46) with domestic students.

Once initial contact was formed, a range of sub-themes emerged which indicated how students interpreted friendship. These are discussed below.

i. Companionship

After initial contact has been made, friendship can be viewed as companionship (3, 64, 26, 130). This companionship is described as "keeping contact" (86, 120), "hanging out together" (87, 88), a person with whom you can do activities together "such as eating, movies, travelling, chatting" (87) and share "intimate details" (88), "ideas" (101) and "have a good time with" (121). Furthermore, there is a shared understanding that a friend will "accompany you when you have difficulties" (126), when you feel "lonely" (3), "depressed" (130) and "happy" (64). Within this companionship, the students believed that a friend is "trustworthy" (76, 72, 134), creates a "feeling of security" (23, 16, 71), will be "respectful of each other" (27) and "will always be there for you" (42).

ii. Support

Support was found to be a crucial component of friendship in this survey. This broader theme included helping and caring for one another, and providing comfort in times of need. The majority of students mentioned that friends were there to help one another,

and typical comments included: “friends can help each other” (109); “a friend is one who can offer a hand when there are difficulties” (56); “you can help each other so as to make progress together” (28). Closely linked to helping was the notion that friends “care about each other” (43, 51, 53, 74, 85, 109, 114) as well as “take care of each other” (67). Friends also comfort each other and are there “for you when you’re down” (122), “with you when you are happy, comfort you when you are sad” (64), “comfort you when you feel depressed” (130), and “can support you silently when you feel lost” (132).

iii. Sharing

Sharing is another central characteristic for friendship formation and development. Friendship can be practical, but this theme implies that it goes beyond that and also extends to “sharing ideas and opinions” (88, 63, 67), “views of life” (58), “views of the world” (58, 132) and “values” (76, 81). Multiple ideas of emotional sharing were evident as participants viewed a friend as “someone you can share your feelings” (13) such as “happiness and sadness” (82, 83, 91, 122), “sweetness and bitterness” (22, 55) and even “annoyance” (111). Essentially a friend is a “like-minded person” (6, 8) with whom you can share “intimate details” (88) such as “secrets” (84). Some participants even viewed a friend as one who could “partner with your soul” (26) and accept your “true self” (81).

iv. Communication

Communication was a theme that referred to the ease of communication amongst friends. They “can communicate well” (52), “at your leisure” (99) and “without obstacles” (19) or “misgivings” (63). Friends “always listen to you” (25) and are “willing to listen” (76) and always there to “talk with” (55). Another important aspect of communication was that with friends you have common “topics to talk about” (43, 67, 125).

v. Common interest

Friends are often “like-minded people” (8) who share common “interests” (5, 24, 50, 73, 100) and “hobbies” (33, 43, 90); and are in the “same community or association” (29). Friends also have “common ideals” (59); “common goals” (69, 87, 119) and “similar views of life, values and views of the world” (58, 132).

A critical component of any friendship is the initial contact, because without it, no friendship can develop. In addition, a friendship is based on the interpretation of what a friend means. International students often find it difficult to make friends with domestic students, and as an international student in Zhou *et al.*'s (2014, p. 37) research stated, “I don't know their culture and the proper ways to come in contact with them, and I am full of misgivings and hesitations.” A review on cross-group friendships by Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew and Wright (2011) pointed out that sustained cross-group friendships involved close contact which often meant individuals spending time together doing a range of activities in different contexts. Yet, establishing an initial contact with tertiary students from other cultures is very difficult and often “full of misgivings and hesitations.” Brown and Daly (2005) emphasised that “the presence of cultural diversity does not automatically lead to intercultural contact” (p. 95). Turner

and Cameron (2016, p. 214) proposed an empirically-driven theoretical model of intergroup contact that “considers the conditions that *encourage* cross-group friendship, as well as the consequences of these relationships and places *confidence in contact* at its heart.” Although their model looked specifically at children and adolescents, it could be applied to others as well. The model’s focus on *confidence in contact* “reflects a state of readiness for positive contact, whereby children have the necessary confidence, skills, beliefs, and experience for successful intergroup contact” (Turner & Cameron, 2016, p. 218). They recommended that schools need to be provided with the required guidance and support to nurture the children’s confidence in contact in order to make them “contact ready” and thus develop cross-group friendships. With support and guidance, could tertiary institutions also create meaningful opportunities for crucial initial contacts between international students and domestic students to make both groups “contact ready”?

Notions such as supporting, helping, caring, sharing and comforting highlight the affective interdependence of friends. Chinese people “expect friends to be involved in all aspects of each other’s lives, to anticipate each other’s needs, and to provide advice on various matters” (Liu *et al.*, 2011, p.187). This highlights the Chinese tendency to be more collectivist in nature and more inclined to support and offer help to others in their ingroups, particularly friends. The Chinese culture has been shaped by Confucian doctrines with an emphasis on friends helping each other in whatever way they can (Cui & Wang, 2007). In collectivist cultures, ingroup friendships are more interdependent (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988) and there is a greater sense of obligation and responsibility to others in one’s particular ingroup(s) (Lustig & Koester, 2010). In addition, in collectivist cultures, “friends are often seen as an extension of the family and are expected to take care of group members and also to be taken care of” (Zhou *et al.*, 2014, p.34). Another theme was similarity, both in communication where students have similar topics to talk about and share with each other, as well as also having similar worldviews, goals and interests. This concurs with Duck and Barnes’ (1992) statement that “people who have similar attitudes or values are indicating that they treat aspects of the world as having similar meanings” (p. 205). Individuals with a similar background and a common understanding of the world find it easier to engage and interact with others who share similar backgrounds and commonalities.

Liu *et al.* (2011) state that compared to Westerners, most Chinese have a more stringent expectation of friendship. The Chinese culture has long been related to Confucianism whose doctrines strictly regulate social behaviour in the “Five Bonds” of human relationships. They are monarch-subject bond, father-son bond, husband-wife bond, brother-brother bond and friend-friend bond. Each bond carries its particular responsibilities and obligations which make relationships quite different from the freer and more equal and open relationships known in the West. Thus, traditionally, to most Chinese, friendship means a strong bond which takes time to build but lasts a lifetime (Li, 2010); friends remain in contact regardless of what they do or where they live (Shen, 2009); and good friends have shared values and interests (Cui & Wang, 2007). Many Chinese view real friends as extended family with whom they tend to do all kinds of activities together, sacrifice themselves for the sake of a harmonious friendship, and depend upon each other in dealing with difficulties. Friends in China are therefore

very intimate, as they know each other's families, personal tastes, habits (Lu & Wang, 2006), and they anticipate each other's needs and expectations as well as provide advice whenever required (Liu *et al.*, 2011). Also, to some extent, many Chinese have a sense of responsibility and obligation to help and support their friends in this friendship culture (Gareis, 2012; Lustig & Koester, 2010). This is common in a collectivist culture where friends are inclined to be more interdependent, and regarded as an extension of family (Martin & Nakayama, 2010; Triandis *et al.*, 1988). In a study with university students in China, Zhou *et al.* (2014) found that the students emphasised the practical function of friendship focusing on providing support and caring for friends. Most students share their deep thoughts and true feelings with their close friends, believing the idiom that a friend in need is a friend indeed, which reflects a traditional virtue and cultural value.

Therefore, the Chinese international students studying in New Zealand would have certain expectations of making friends with New Zealand students based on their own social and cultural norms and values associated with friendship. The New Zealand students would have their own cultural norms for friendship which might be different to those of the Chinese students; therefore, there would be some intercultural incongruence in the expectation and formation of a friendship. An intercultural incongruence may result in the Chinese international students becoming frustrated in making friends with New Zealand students, as there is a lack of shared understanding of the notion of friendship.

Benefits of having friends whilst studying abroad

When we make friends with people from our own culture, we learn the rules and practices as part of our socialisation process. Thus "you know how to make friends" (16) and there is "no need to learn new ways of getting along with them" (91). This implies that you share the same notions of what a friend is and you also know the specific social and cultural norms and values (Liu *et al.*, 2011) associated with friendship. It includes specific ideas such as having a shared cultural background (16, 73, 98, 118) and therefore "easier to connect with" (66), they have "a common lifestyle" (6, 87); "same way of thinking" (19); "similar values" (56, 37); "shared experiences" (8, 13); they can "do activities together" (28); and having friends from the same culture "helps to avoid troubles caused by differences in languages and cultures" (33). These comments indicate that with people from your own culture you can feel more at ease and develop closer friendships which are more like friendships at home. Linked to this, some students noted that in making friends with other Chinese individuals there are "no cultural differences" (40), "no cultural conflicts" (47, 56), "fewer divergences" (4), they "feel safe" (4), they can "emotionally rely on each other" (50) and it is easier to "have empathy with each other" (9, 19, 50, 115, 124, 132). These are significant comments as they indicate that the initial contact stage of making friends is easier with people from one's own culture because of a shared cultural understanding of the expectations of a friendship. This is in line with Gareis' (2012, p, 310) comment that "cultural similarity makes behavior explanations and predictions in initial encounters easier, thus paving the way for deeper involvement". Cultural similarity therefore not only facilitates the initial contact, but also paves the way for the development of the friendship.

These commonalities also developed a strong sense of belonging (8, 25, 43, 56, 90, 115) and being connected in a foreign country (51, 68). The notion of support with people from your own culture is that it is easier to seek help and advice with studies, adjusting to new situations, difficulties, work, and life situations (56, 67, 69, 76, 90, 136). They “feel safe” (4), they can “emotionally rely on each other” (50) and it is easier to “have empathy with each other” (9, 19, 50, 115, 124, 132). As humans we all have a sense of belonging and a need to belong, and in fact this is fundamental to an individual’s emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual well-being. However, sense of belonging differs considerably across cultures (Chiu, Chow, McBride, & Mol, 2016). Individuals in collectivist cultures tend to be interdependent with others (Liu *et al.*, 2011) and belonging to a social group or ingroup is crucial and part of an individual’s identity. Therefore, the Chinese participants who are from a collectivist culture may strongly need to have a sense of belonging when they are in a foreign country as it assists with their overall well-being. Having friends from one’s own culture and having a sense of belonging also helps students reduce “the feeling of loneliness” (62, 69, 101) and “homesickness” (61). As one student put it, no matter how close the friendship is with someone from a different culture, when she is lonely, she is comforted by friends from her own culture (81).

These “effort-saving” commonalities are a central benefit in making friends from one’s own culture. When students study abroad however, they engage with individuals who would not necessarily share these commonalities. Students in this study were asked to highlight the benefits of making friends with domestic students, and 61.1% believed that having New Zealand friends was beneficial, for example to learn about local cultures in order to adapt to their host country more effectively. For 53% of the Chinese students, the principal benefit of making friends with New Zealand students was to localise through learning and understanding, particularly the local cultures, worldviews, values and norms, and ways of living. This learning leads to enriching the experiences of studying abroad as well as expanding knowledge and extending their circle of friends. For example, they would not have had such an experience had they stayed at home, (64), or experienced ‘real’ New Zealand (121). They also wanted to learn about New Zealand in order “not to offend local cultures” (31) and learn other ways of socialising besides the Chinese way (51).

Over 25% of the students stated that integrating into the local cultures would be very beneficial for them and “making friends with local people is an important way to integrate” (63). This also included understanding slang (5), the local customs (27) or the local rules (90). This helps with adjusting and settling into the community (49, 81, 132), so that they can integrate “better” (11), “easier” (124), and “faster” (35, 75, 113) into the local cultures. Only 15% of the students stated that a benefit of making New Zealand friends was to practice English in order to improve their language skills.

Other benefits of having New Zealand friends were more utilitarian, and included getting help with day-to-day matters such as finding good places to eat (35, 64), learning where to buy things, traffic (64), travel (67), getting part-time jobs (24), and assisting with possible jobs in the future (24, 86, 117). Other benefits were more social in nature and included expanding their social network, contacts, and circle of friends (12, 24, 87,

90, 111) in order to overcome loneliness (15) and enhance a sense of belonging and of “being accepted” by New Zealanders (58) and of being welcomed (49, 62, 76).

A primary benefit for the Chinese students of having New Zealand friends was to learn about their different ways and lifestyles, and this is in line with research conducted by Vaccarino and Dresler-Hawke (2011) and Zhou *et al.* (2014). However, initial contacts are easier with individuals from the same culture (Gareis, 2012), whereas it could be more difficult with individuals from different cultures. When initiating interactions with individuals from different cultures, there may be higher levels of anxiety and uncertainty which make communication more challenging and difficult (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). The Chinese students may also lack what Turner and Cameron (2016) refer to as the confidence in initial contact where the students do not have the necessary confidence, skills, and experience for a successful contact with New Zealand students.

Barriers to having friends whilst studying abroad

The Chinese students were asked to comment on any barriers they have encountered when developing friendships with New Zealand students. This section presents and discusses these findings.

Cultural differences are seen as the greatest barrier to friendship formation. These differences suggest that international students have less in common with domestic students and can thus become a barrier to further contact and ultimately friendship formation. Some participants stated that “It is very hard to make a true friend from another country because of the difference of each other’s cultural background” (56). Often the Chinese students “do not understand” (32) the domestic students, and “their lifestyle is totally different from us” (87). The New Zealand students appear “a little bit distant due to different background in culture” (86) and this cultural difference can result in people not communicating well or not at all (28). Not many Kiwis would like to accept Asian people as good friends because of cultural difference (25) and they already have their own friends (38). As reported in the section of notions of a friend, “common interest” was a significant theme where friends tend to be “like-minded people” (8). Some participants felt that it’s “hard to approach” domestic students (75) and that they had “nothing to say” (7) to them. Other participants described the difficulty of integration saying, “Sometimes I feel that I am an outsider” (93), and domestic students “have their own circle, and it is hard to integrate” (113). These barriers confirm the findings of other studies on intercultural friendship formation (Oetzel, 2009; Smart *et al.*, 2000; Zhang & Rentz, 1996; Vaccarino & Dresler-Hawke, 2011; Zhou *et al.*, 2014). According to Wright’s (1978) theory, friendship involves how the other individual is interpreted, and this is evident here where both the Chinese and the New Zealand students interpret friendships differently, based on their own cultural backgrounds.

Language is another barrier that may lead to misunderstandings, and hence create distance between international and domestic students - “we sometimes may have misunderstanding with each other ... we cannot totally understand each other” (53). It is well documented that language is a significant barrier to friendship formation (Gareis, Merkin, & Goldman, 2011; Bird & Holmes, 2005; Vaccarino & Dresler-

Hawke, 2011; Brebner, 2005) as it can block the breadth and depth of discussions which are necessary for the development of relationships (Sias, Drzewiecka, Meares, Bent, Konomi, Ortega, & White, 2008), particularly with international students who often struggle to express their feelings in their second or third language (Volet & Ang, 1998). Ryan and Twibell (2000) echoed this by stating that when communicating in a second or third language, there will be misunderstandings for both the speaker and the listener. A significant frustration for international students when trying to make domestic friends is that they lack confidence in their English language ability, so they tend to stay within their own cultural groups (Lewthwaite, 1996). Moreover, some students perceived that doing some activities without sufficient communication “can’t establish a long-term relationship” (91).

Lack of opportunities to interact with domestic students is perceived as a barrier to making friends. Some students attributed this problem to domestic students being “very arrogant” (59, 117), they “discriminate against immigrants” (73), “some even look down upon you” (124) and “they don’t like to make friends with Chinese” (117). Some participants believed that the domestic students “exclude international students, especially Chinese” (130), “some local people don’t want to make a friend with me” (66) and if “they despise you, how can I make a friend?” (31). Other studies have also reported that students have to deal with prejudice and negative attitudes from host individuals, and these attitudinal barriers are difficult to overcome (Volet & Ang, 1998). A study by Ward and Masgoret (2004) found that some students who had been living in New Zealand for a long time believed that New Zealanders had negative attitudes towards international students.

The perception that domestic students are not always voluntarily willing to engage with international students can create a barrier to friendship formation. One component of Wright’s (1978) theory of friendship requires individuals to interact voluntarily and spend time together. The mere presence of international students at a university campus is not sufficient to promote intercultural interactions or develop intercultural friendships (Ward, 2006), yet these interactions are “a prerequisite to the development of multicultural competency” (Lehto, Cai, Fu, & Chen, 2014, p.850) in a global world. However it is unlikely that significant intercultural interactions will occur spontaneously between international and domestic students, so intentional interventionist strategies need to be put in place so that intercultural interactions are fostered and developed (Schreiber, 2011). Ward (2006) reports four strategies that have been used effectively to foster positive intercultural perceptions and relations, namely peer-pairing, cooperative learning, residential programmes and training for cultural competencies. Peer-pairing for example, involves the collaboration between international students and domestic students who meet regularly outside of the classroom. This strategy increases intercultural interactions and boosts cultural awareness. These non-academic interactions and activities outside of the classroom include sports and recreational activities, entertainment, social activities, travel, and hobby groups, to name a few.

Furthermore, some participants perceived that the domestic students “are happy to communicate with outsiders, but it is not realistic to become good friends” (61) and “they were happy to be an acquaintance, but not open to accept Asian students

as friends” (25). Other participants said that “local people can make you feel nice and friendly, however the communication will stay at a very superficial level ... it is very difficult to become a very good friend with Kiwis” (63), and many students reported having “almost no Kiwi friends” (83). This aligns with research findings from Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes (2007), where international students believed that domestic students were not really interested in getting to know them, as well as Peiselt’s (2007) findings that “international students perceived New Zealanders as reluctant to participate in bi-cultural friendships” (p. 75). Research has shown that a primary complaint of international students is the lack of meaningful contact with local people. In their research, Ward and Masgoret (2004) found that there is a tendency for international students to spend more time with students from their own culture and other international students than New Zealand domestic students. Increasing contact with New Zealand domestic students resulted in lower levels of perceived discrimination, greater satisfaction with life, and better academic performance, to name a few. Ward and Masgoret (2004) state that these findings are consistent with other research in social psychology and cross-cultural transition and adaptation where there is evidence that intergroup interactions indicate that “increased contact of a voluntary, equal and meaningful nature leads to more positive intergroup perceptions” as “contact allows members of different cultural, national or racial groups to know each other as individuals rather than as stereotyped members of out-groups” (p. 56).

Many international students study abroad as they want to learn about new cultures, expand their knowledge and understanding, extend their circle of friends, as well as improve their English. Unfortunately, the reality for many of them is different and does not meet these expectations. The barriers presented in this section can impact on the Chinese students’ general satisfaction of studying and living in New Zealand as well as the improvement of their English proficiency.

Implication and conclusion

This study explored the perceptions of friendship of Chinese international students at a university in New Zealand. Notions or descriptors of a friend are based mainly on their Chinese cultural and social norms and values associated with friendship formation. When they are in a foreign culture, they apply their home cultural norms and values of forming friendships to making friends from the host culture. However, their home norms and values may not be the same as those of the host culture and the Chinese students may feel their expectations of friendship formation are not fulfilled. The New Zealand domestic students have their own cultural norms for friendship formation which are different, and this intercultural incongruence leaves the Chinese international students feeling frustrated and not always understanding why they are unable to make New Zealand friends in the same way as making friends with other Chinese students.

The Chinese students see the benefits of making New Zealand friends as a means of integrating into a foreign culture. These benefits are associated to both their present situation and possible future goals. Although most of the Chinese students stated that having New Zealand friends was beneficial, they also reported the reality of encountering

significant barriers that challenge the formation of intercultural friendships. For international students there are often limited opportunities to have contact with domestic students, and this reduces their chances of developing friendships. More importantly, the perception that domestic students are not always voluntarily willing to engage with international students could also create a barrier to friendship formation.

As Wright's (1978) theory of friendship posits, friendship involves voluntary interactions between people who want to spend time together. Without these voluntary interactions, it is very difficult for friendships to develop, and for Chinese international students who want to have New Zealand domestic friends, this is very difficult. Friendship also involves how individuals interpret one another, and this interpretation varies across cultures, thus making it difficult for students from different cultures to form friendships as they each have their own interpretations of what a friendship means. Could higher education institutions play a significant role in being the bridge between promoting voluntary interactions and assisting with interpretations of friendship? Studying abroad in a different educational environment can be exciting, stimulating and rewarding. However, a new environment can also pose numerous challenges, both in the academic context and the wider socio-cultural context. It requires significant effort from all parties, international students, domestic students, institutions, and local communities. Adapting to a new socio-cultural environment is about acquiring and performing culturally appropriate social skills and behavioural competence in order to "fit in" the host culture (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). Domestic students could also benefit from intercultural interactions with international students as this would increase their multicultural competence in the 21st century global village. Most higher education institutions do offer orientation programmes for international and domestic students, but this is often only at the beginning of a semester. Lehto *et al.* (2014) aptly point out, "Traditional orientations and welcome picnics at the beginning of their first semester are not sufficient anymore" (p. 850). Interventions need to be intentional, regular and ongoing. As Deardorff (2009) highlights, by intentionally integrating international and domestic students, the students' learning will be enhanced and it will also increase the higher education institutions' capacity to prepare global citizens.

With globalisation fostering the propagation of cultural diversity, there is a growing need for individuals to develop their multicultural competencies. Higher education institutions are in a prime position to champion and promote systemic interventions to assist both international and domestic students to engage with each other in order to promote cultural understanding.

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