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## How can Chinese international students' host-national contact contribute to social connectedness, social support and reduced prejudice in the mainstream society? Testing a moderated mediation model

Chun Cao<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Qian Meng<sup>a,b</sup>, Liang Shang<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Changchun University of Science and Technology, Weixing Road 7186, Changchun, China

<sup>b</sup> Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

<sup>c</sup> Jilin University, No.2699 Qianjin Street, Changchun City, China



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### ABSTRACT

Guided by the contact hypothesis, this study examined host culture adoption of Chinese students sojourning in France as a mediator between their host-national contact (i.e., face-to-face contact and online contact) and social connectedness, perceived social support and reduced prejudice in the mainstream society. We also examined whether face-to-face contact served as a moderator that modified the impacts of online contact. A group of 211 Chinese students in France responded to a web-based survey. Results from structural equation modeling analysis revealed that face-to-face contact significantly predicted Chinese students' adoption of the host culture. Host culture adoption, in turn, influenced social connectedness, perceived social support and prejudice. In contrast, online contact was not predictive of host culture adoption, but had significant direct effects on social connectedness, perceived social support and prejudice. However, direct face-to-face contact did not moderate the relationship between online contact and the predicted variables. Bootstrapping methods were employed to investigate the mediating effects of host culture adoption and revealed that host culture adoption was a full mediator between face-to-face contact and the outcome variables.

### Introduction

Studying abroad has increasingly become a common practice among Chinese students in the quest for desirable educational opportunities and better future career prospects. According to statistics from the latest CampusFrance report (CampusFrance, 2017), the number of Chinese students studying in France continued to climb, reaching almost 30,000 in the academic year of 2015–2016. The report also showed that Chinese students accounted for 9.1% of all international students in France, emerging as its second largest source of international students after Moroccan students. Nonetheless, an extensive review of the literature informed us that there is a striking lack of research on Chinese students' sociocultural experiences in France. One of the few studies conducted with Chinese students in European Union countries revealed that Chinese students in France suffered from more serious social problems than those in the UK (Cao, Zhu, & Meng, 2016). As noted above, the current study focuses on Chinese students sojourning in France and explores what factors can potentially contribute to their sense of social connectedness, perceived social support and reduced

\* Corresponding author at: Changchun University of Science and Technology, Weixing Road 7186, Changchun, China.

E-mail addresses: [caogecheng@aliyun.com](mailto:caogecheng@aliyun.com) (C. Cao), [mengqianlucky@aliyun.com](mailto:mengqianlucky@aliyun.com) (Q. Meng), [shanglianggavin@sina.com](mailto:shanglianggavin@sina.com) (L. Shang).

prejudice in the mainstream society. The authors selected them as dependent variables in this study because they are important social phenomena and measures of positive social relationships (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser, & Kumar, 2014; Caricati, Mancini, & Marletta, 2016; Lee & Robbins, 1995). Investigating these variables can be important for Chinese international students who are brought up in a collectivism society where it is highly valued to pursue and maintain harmonious personal relationships in social settings (Wheeler, Reis, & Bond, 1989).

The contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 2008) proposes that intergroup contact can alleviate prejudice toward cultural “others”, under some prerequisite conditions, such as pursuit of common goals, equal status and cooperative attitudes. The basic rationale for this important theory is that prejudice largely originates from an incomplete or mistaken information about a group and can be reduced as one gains more knowledge about norms, traditions and behavioral practices that are characteristic of this group through intergroup contact (Anastasio, Rust, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1994). A large body of literature has generally supported the contact hypothesis among various samples (e.g., Dhont & Van Hiel, 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011). However, it should be noted that although there is a wide spectrum of research on the direct face-to-face contact (e.g., Cao, Zhu, & Meng, 2017; Dhont & Van Hiel, 2011; Vezzali, Hewstone, Capozza, Trifiletti, & Bernardo, 2017), very few studies examine effects of online contact on sociocultural experiences among immigrants or sojourners. With widespread use of internet and popularity of social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, LinkedIn and Wechat), online contact may serve as an important communication channel for acculturating individuals and deserves more scholarly attention. Therefore, the current study intends to examine functioning mechanisms of the two types of host-national contact (i.e., face-to-face contact and online contact) in affecting social connectedness, perceived social support and reduced prejudice among Chinese students in the French mainstream society.

#### *Intergroup contact and its effects on social connectedness, social support and prejudice*

Prior research argues that social relationships can be manifested in social connectedness (Lee & Robbins, 1995) and perceived social support (Bertram et al., 2014). The former was defined as an aspect of the individual self that reflects the subjective sense of being in close relations with the social world (Lee & Robbins, 1995), and the latter was conceptualized in this study as Chinese students’ perceived level of support they receive from their host-national friends who may be either domestic students or other local peers. Prejudice is also a ubiquitous social relationship phenomenon that is often used to measure the negative attitudes or feeling between different cultural or ethnic groups (Caricati et al., 2016).

Extensions of the contact hypothesis argue that intergroup contact can also be beneficial to build positive intergroup attitudes and relations (Pettigrew et al., 2011). For instance, a focus group study by Trahar and Hyland (2011) found that many students perceived that intergroup contact in cross-cultural working groups helped build new intercultural friendships and enhanced sense of mutual closeness. Some early studies found a positive association between amount of social contact and perceived social support (e.g., Cohen, McGowan, Fooskas, & Rose, 1984; Holahan & Moos, 1981). It can be also the case that in intercultural contexts, the more intergroup contact an acculturating individual has with host members, the more social support he or she may receive from host members (Lee, Sung, Zhou, & Lee, 2017). The contact hypothesis discussed previously and many studies under its guidance have described adequately as to the positive association between intergroup contact and reduced prejudice (e.g., Dhont & Van Hiel, 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Zagefka et al., 2017).

Besides the traditional type of face-to-face contact, this study also measures Chinese students’ online contact with French host members through social media. Online contact can play an important role in international students seeking and receiving social support necessary for adjusting to the host society (Seo, Harn, Ebrahim, & Aldana, 2016). International students’ contact with local peers using Facebook was found to be positively associated with social adjustment and perceived social support (Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim, & LaRose, 2012). In addition, frequent online contact with other social media users tends to increase sense of social connectedness (Riedl, Köbler, Goswami, & Krcmar, 2013).

#### *Intergroup contact and host culture adoption*

Berry (2005) defined acculturation as “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members”. Berry and colleagues (Berry, 1994; Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987) developed a bi-dimensional acculturation model: adoption of host culture and maintenance of heritage culture. According to the model, the two fundamental orthogonal dimensions do not necessarily work against each other, indicating that acculturating individuals can absorb the host culture and maintain their heritage culture at the same time. In the current study, only the dimension of host culture adoption was measured because this study focuses on Chinese international students’ host-national contact and sociocultural experiences with French majority members, and these experiences have been consistently revealed to be primarily associated with the extent of acculturation to the mainstream society (Lebedeva, Tatarko, & Berry, 2016; Imamura & Zhang, 2014).

Host-national contact can lay the foundation for positive attitudes towards multiculturalism (Tip et al., 2012), which, in turn, may motivate acculturating individuals to learn and imitate host cultural norms and traditions. Supporting evidence can be found in a study by Liu (2006) which, by surveying 295 respondents of Chinese origin in Australia, revealed that intergroup contact was a significant predictor of host-culture adoption. A more recent study showed that Chinese international students’ social ties with host members can significantly contribute to a high level of acculturation (Cao et al., 2017). Besides effects of intergroup contact taking place in the real world, some studies have revealed the significant role of social media usage in developing immigrants’ acculturation level (Li & Tsai, 2015; McKelvy & Chatterjee, 2017). It is important to note that social media use cannot be considered as equivalent to online contact. Actually, social media usage includes but is not limited to online contact, involving many other online behaviors

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