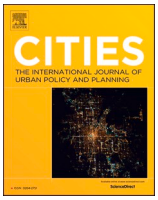
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Betwixt and between in an 'unreadable city': Chinese students' urban citizenship and belonging in pandemic-era Amsterdam

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ABSTRACT

As newcomers to Amsterdam, Chinese international students arriving during 2020 – 2021 had to navigate a peculiar urban landscape shaped by the Covid-19 pandemic. Rather than the pandemic's direct impacts, we highlight the unique spatiotemporal context it mediated – a period characterized by its liminality, or in-betweenness, further marked by ambiguity and uncertainty. The study draws on narrative interviews to investigate the students' urban experiences and socio-spatial engagement, focusing on their sense of belonging and urban citizenship. Citizenship is conceptualized as a 'lived' that is practiced and contested, making it affective and contextual. We argue that citizenship is inextricably linked to belonging and center feeling belongingness and familiarity as proxies claiming urban citizenship. The interplay of individual subjectivities, socio-spatial practices, and transnational identities helped produce reflexive spaces of home and recontextualized Chinese dynamics in Amsterdam, demonstrating the transcendent nature of the 'urban' beyond physical boundaries. We find that interlocutors often attached meanings to micro-spaces rather than the city as a whole. Experiencing liminal transience and racialized (micro)aggressions impacted, to varying degrees, the participants' desire and ability to become familiar with their urban environments and build citizenship.

1. Introduction

'When I look at a building, I don't know what kind of people are living or, what this building is for or what kind of history it has (…) I just don't know how to read this city, it is telling a story in a language I do not speak.'

Claire (22, graduate student), one of our interlocutors, recalled her lack of familiarity and belonging when walking around her new 'home' city after arriving in Amsterdam for her study in 2021. Her arrival coincided with Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, which redrew urban contexts, creating urban realities that contrasted with the bustling imaginaries of metropolitan areas like Amsterdam. Moving beyond the documented direct impacts the restrictions had, we focus on how this sociotemporal context mediated newcomers' experiences seeking to build a home. 'Pandemic cities' were peculiar and characterized with ambiguity and obscurity about future urban realities. It was a liminal period, where liminality describes epochs between the 'dislocation of established structures' and uncertain futures (Thomassen et al., 2015). Utilizing an affective understanding of urban citizenship as a lived experience that is lived, performed and contested, we focus on how newly arriving Chinese international students experienced the city. We highlight how they enacted citizenship through spatial practices and how their citizenship was negotiated and contested within the socio-temporal context of the pandemic. The restrictions' impact varied significantly across different communities, including residents of the same city. As transnational agentic actors, newcomer students made their homes, sought to belong, and cultivated familiarity between homes across oceans. Confronted by racialized practices during the pandemic, their quest for engagement and belonging in their new home city was contested by some who saw them as undesirable and unfamiliar (Leung et al., forthcoming).

We engage with the scholarship surrounding urban citizenship, belonging and familiarity with particular attention to migrant newcomers. Building citizenship is shaped by sociocultural practices, spatial engagement and interpersonal interaction. Citizenship as a lived experience underscores its affective dimensions, premised on 'feeling' belonging. By focusing on the notions of familiarity and belonging as proxies of urban citizenship, we explore the challenges and opportunities for Chinese newcomer students to enact urban citizenship. While physically in a pandemic city, they straddled between on- and offline

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spaces. Their practices varied diversely as their behavior was influenced by their subjectivities, positionalities, and life plans. Basing our analysis of narrative interviews with the participants, we aim to demonstrate how their urban citizenship is temporal and context-specific. With attention to the role of space and time, we unpack the 'urban', arguing that student newcomers' enactment of citizenship is not restricted to the city's boundaries. Our interlocutors' stories illustrate the importance of diverse spatialities, ranging from micro-spaces to transnationally linked spaces. Temporalities are key in shaping one's sense of familiarity and belonging. We argue that students' transient and liminal experiences in Amsterdam impacted their interest in and ability to claim urban citizenship, since gaining familiarity and belonging require emotionally-coded investments. The contextual focus can deepen our understanding of migrant-specific solidarities and challenges in urban settings, shed light on how migrant urban citizenship has evolved during the pandemic, and provide insight into post-pandemic urban landscapes.

2. Urban citizenship as a lived experience: Feeling, practicing and the politics of belonging

Social scientists have long emphasized citizenship's social-cultural and lived dimensions, extending it beyond its former rational-legal narrow confines (Cohen et al., 2022). Citizenship is 'lived' through daily experiences, performed and contested in everyday contexts, such as urban spaces (Sultana, 2020). Studying citizenship as a lived experience underlines the need for closer attention to the emotional dimensions of citizenship (Ho, 2009) and the sociopolitical contextual factors that shape the differential experiences (Lister, 2007). Urban citizenship is performed through socio-spatial practices, such as daily routines, mobility and interacting with urban environments. These practices are claims to urban space and shaped by subjective emotional processes, such as place-attachments and feelings of belonging (Bloemraad, 2018). However, challenges can impede socio-spatial engagement. Some actors can contest others' right to perform their practices by challenging their citizenship claims and belongingness, often aiming to exclude (Wright, 2015) Cities can thus be sites of disputes over some bodies' belongingness and movement through spaces (Brahinsky, 2011), which can result in unequal urban experiences (Amer & Leung, 2023). A lived citizenship approach centers the feeling of (non) belonging as inseparable from being the experience of being a citizen (Kallio et al., 2020).

A 'thicker' and more fluid conceptualization of belonging encompasses citizenship (Antonsich, 2010; Wood & Black, 2018). Yuval-Davis (2006) distinguishes between 'belonging' and the 'politics of belonging'. On the one hand, a *sense of belonging* is an emotional notion experienced through feelings of 'being at home' (Antonsich, 2010, 645; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Emotional dimensions of belonging, such as experiencing familiarity and affinity, influence the nature of individuals' practices, which require a degree of 'emotional investment' (Halse, 2018). Thus, belonging manifests in 'practicing' belonging (Wright, 2015). On the other hand, the *politics of belonging* are the sociopolitical dynamics that define citizenship-based participation through determining the boundaries of political communities by demarcating "us" and "them" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, 204). Politics of belonging define the contours of citizenship and form the basis for socio-spatial processes of inclusion and exclusion (Antonsich, 2010) shaped by subjective interpretations of who rightfully belongs and who does not. Subjectivities are therefore key in shaping lived urban citizenship. The following sections address how the 'sense of belonging,' shaped by familiarity and temporality, affects migrants' urban practices, and how the 'politics of belonging' and contestations to migrants' belongingness can disrupt their urban practices.

2.1. Sense of belonging

Foregrounding senses of belongingness in our consideration of citizenship as a 'lived' experience, rather than merely 'on paper,' echoes the call for an 'affective turn' in citizenship studies. Lived urban citizenship manifests as performances of socio-spatial practices. Emotions shape behavior and "push people to do things" (Smith et al., 2018, 2). Feeling belonging fosters the emergence of affective connections to people and places (Wood & Black, 2018). Migrants therefore practice belonging through their performance of urban practices that embody their claims to urban citizenship. Experiencing repeated meaningful engagements fosters emotional connections and place-attachments that contribute to "creating subjectivities, collectivities and places" (Wright, 2015, 500). A sense of belonging is an emotional connection to particular people and places. However, a sense of belonging is not tethered to tangible places. 'Home' can be a symbolic place to which one is familiar and emotionally attached (Antonsich, 2010) and people can feel belonging to various 'objects of attachment' or identity-based groups (Yuval-Davis, 2006, 199). Overlapping identities and localities facilitate the fluidity of community membership, allowing people to identify with and affiliate to differently scaled, situated, and sometimes transnational, communities simultaneously (Wood & Black, 2018).

In our consideration of urban citizenship, spatial familiarity plays an important role. Familiarity with one's environment allows the development of context-specific and meaningful place-attachments through repeated encounters. Familiarity is conceptualized as an embodied relationship that develops progressively between individuals and their environments (Felder, 2021). Daily spatial practices contribute to increasing situational knowledge of spatial specificities through repeated engagement with spaces and people within them. Through these experiences, people can understand and connect with their environments, making individual and collective meanings. Meaningful memories or recurring interactions, such as greeting locals, can contribute to the emergence of familiarity and facilitate newcomers' feelings of belonging to a place (Felder, 2021). Belongingness can facilitate "acts of care" that "protect, preserve and transform" places (Wood & Black, 2018, 176), or contribute to the creation of new spaces. Urban citizenship, in the form of the sense of belonging to a city, is 'practiced' through performing meaningful spatial practices. These practices are 'claims' to urban citizenship, affirming the right to access and engage with the urban (Bloemraad, 2018).

Familiarity facilitates and is facilitated through meaningful involvement with a community and a place. Antonsich (2010, 646) calls the feelings of rootedness and security 'place-belongingness', which Paulsen (2019) describes as the process of 'transforming space into place'. Nevertheless, increased familiarity does not necessarily entail belonging. Despite physical familiarity with a place, belonging can still seem unattainable through the lack of attachments, culminating in non-belonging (Wright, 2015). In other words, familiarity is a prerequisite for the emergence of belonging, while unfamiliarity, or lack of sameness and affinity, results in non-belonging (Felder, 2021). The liminal dimension of migration makes the processes of familiarization and building belonging particular among migrants. Liminality is 'the moment between moments, and the place between places' (Bell, 2021, p. 81). Transnational migrants often exist in third spaces of in-betweenness, such as between imaginaries of 'home' and the 'homeland.' Experiencing deterritorialization and reterritorialization can cause emotional responses and practices that produce 'reflexive communities' (Christou, 2011, 250). These communities are spaces produced through routine practices that resemble those in the 'homeland.' As they straddle different homes, migrants often belong to multiple places, spanning their 'old' and 'new' homes. These 'homes' can be of intersecting scales, ranging from micro to macro, local to transnational. Migrants' transnational identities, therefore, often shape their claims to citizenship, create translocal practices, and mediate their emotional connections to places, while their belongingness is negotiated (Christou, 2011, 249).

Migrants can also experience temporal liminality. Spatial and temporal contexts shape migrants' identities, their perception of their connection to the environment, and how migrants perceive present and

future possibilities (Li & Gong, 2022). Sojourning migrants with temporary residence can have liminal experiences that feel transitional between two phases of one's life. Liminality describes the transitory phrase and associated ambiguity that derive from 'the dislocation of [previously] established structures' and the 'uncertainty about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes' (Thomassen et al., 2015, 2). Liminality associated with transience, whether forced or voluntary, produces temporal barriers that exclude individuals and groups from society and everyday life. Temporal barriers can result in liminal moments, periods or epochs (Thomassen et al., 2015). Moving to a new sociocultural context can destabilize one's self-perception as the experience involves renegotiating one's identities in a new landscape; (re) adjustment thus requires active participation (Li & Gong, 2022). Factors such as length of residence and country of origin affect international students' sociocultural adjustment (Bender et al., 2019). Experiencing liminality can influence behavior, including a diminished interest to seek meaningful engagement, such as forming deep social bonds. Uncertainty during 'in-betweenness' is associated with a lack of clarity about the future, eliciting feelings of discomfort and anxiety. The high possibility of change characterizes liminal periods with their fluidity. These conditions contribute to a seemingly perpetual state of transience, which can cause individuals to hesitate or lose interest in investing in uncertain connections, inhibiting the emergence of familiarity and belonging. In our study, the participants, as newcomers, can experience liminality between their previous and new homes, or because of their temporary residence in the city. Being in-between the 'dislocation' of pre-pandemic life and the uncertainty of post-pandemic city life, students find future post-graduation planning difficult and current circumstances unpredictable.

2.2. Politics of belonging

Citizenship and belonging are contested. Their discursive meanings are in a constant process of (re)negotiation between contrasting conceptions (Sultana, 2020). Residents of the same locality can have contrasting interpretations of urban citizenship, hence varying perceptions of who belongs and who is entitled to citizenship. Such meanings are impacted by context-specific power relations that are practiced in everyday places, intersecting with class, gender, race, sexuality, ability and other identities (Fincher, 2013). Migrants' bodies are situated within racialized colonial histories with memories that influence their experiences and interactions with others (Christou, 2011). Racialized individuals "navigate spaces shaped by historical processes" signified by "the presence of certain people and the absence of others" (Felder, 2021, p. 189). These racialized processes are situational and contextual. Racist discourses impact the 'politics of belonging' by situating individuals onto a spectrum of "familiarity and strangeness" (Shaker et al., 2023, 572). This spectrum shapes perceptions of belongingness and manifests in local practices that challenge the legitimacy of citizenship claims (Sultana, 2020).

Racist encounters in urban places contest people's citizenship claims based on racialized physical appearances. Experiencing such encounters results in exclusions that can be physical, through disruption of spatial practices by those deemed 'undesired.' Non-verbal cues such as prolonged stares can also contest others' belonging. Feeling 'watched' or 'out of place' causes discomfort and affects individuals' engagement with specific spaces. As agentic individuals, those who experience racism can choose to act differently resulting from such discomfort. Compared to those who 'blend in' more easily, racialized individuals can experience 'hypervisibility' (Leinonen & Toivanen, 2014), which can induce hyperawareness of self. Accordingly, they might limit their spatial practices, reduce their spatial engagement, or avoid spaces entirely, effectively excluding themselves (Amer & Leung, 2023). These dynamics make racialized migrants' belonging susceptible to constant (re)negotiation, sometimes culminating in a liminal state between belonging and non-belonging. Yet, some might turn to familiarities and find belonging through transnational and translocal linkages, while others engage in activism to counter exclusion. Depending on multiple and changing positionalities, one can adopt a combination of these strategies in navigating the politics of belonging.

3. Research context and methodology

Amsterdam has a high quality of life and is often portrayed as a socially-liberal and multicultural city that is also a European business hub, being part of the Dutch Randstad Metropolitan Area. This urban identity is prevalent in popular discourses and is often a selling point in university marketing. Such imaginaries, along with housing several global multinationals' headquarters, attract international students who are also attracted to post-graduation career prospects. Career-focused students may also qualify for a 'highly-skilled migrant' residence permit in some sectors. The city's high-ranking public universities, namely *Universiteit van Amsterdam*[1] and the *Vrije Universiteit,*[2] are internationally-oriented and have various English-taught higher education programs that attract thousands of international students, tripling from 31,500 in 2006 to 122,300 in 2022 (Statista, 2023). Over the last decade, Chinese students constituted the largest non-EU student group in the Netherlands, remaining consistent through the pandemic (NUFFIC, 2023). The study focuses on the impact of the pandemic's liminality. Several lockdowns were imposed in the Netherlands, with severity fluctuating over time. Measures included curfews, social distancing, and closure of non-essential businesses, schools and universities. This coincided with academic years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022, making education mostly online. Vaccination and decreasing infections allowed for gradually reopening educational institutions by late 2021.

We draw on 16 semi-structured in-depth interviews[3] with Chinese international students enrolled at an Amsterdam university and arrived during the 2020/2021 or 2021/2022 academic years. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin and English between October 2022 and March 2023, held online or in-person, and lasted 30 to 60 min. Participants were recruited first through the researchers' networks, then through snowballing. The sample size is relatively small due to the specified time frame and since many potential interviewees had left the Netherlands. Interview guides focused on urban engagement and based on a literature review on urban citizenship, international students, and transnational migration experiences. The team regularly discussed findings in debriefing meetings to ensure method consistency. Accordingly, the interview guide was adapted to explore links between spatial practices and belonging. Data collection ended with the researchers' agreement that no new themes were emerging.

During the interviews, participants discussed daily socio-spatial urban practices during the pandemic, interpersonal interactions, mobility, spatial engagement, and educational and commercial activities. The semi-structured interviews allowed for a narrative setting for participants to discuss their experiences through story-telling. Participants were also asked to share the reflections on that period, degree of familiarity with Amsterdam, and emotions associated with specific experiences or places, revealing emotions such as isolation, satisfaction, exclusion, anxiety, loneliness, and apathy. Data analysis involved inductive and deductive coding in a cyclical approach. Analysis aligned with relevant literature on student migration and findings were corroborated with literature on migrant urban citizenship. The gap between the lifting of pandemic restrictions and the interviews is a limitation since participants had to recall experiences from memory. Researchers used the city maps as visual aids to mitigate this. Three social science researchers (two of Chinese background, one male, one

[1] The University of Amsterdam.
[2] Free University Amsterdam.
[3] See Appendix A for list of research participants and relevant information.

female; one non-Chinese male) conducted the study under the supervision of the research lead (of Chinese background, female). The two Chinese researchers led the participant-interviewer matching based on the participants' language preferences, assigning participants comfortable interviewing in English to the non-Chinese-speaking interviewer. Despite concerns about the depth of the English interviews, there was no variation in interview length. All participants were enrolled in English-taught degrees. The interviewers, former international students in the Netherlands, were able to create proximity and build rapport with participants. The discussion is supplemented with findings from a prelude project, which focused on the experiences of racialization among Chinese people in Dutch cities. Both research projects obtained ethical approval from the ethics committees of the [removed from anonymous manuscript] respectively. Participants provided informed written consent regarding usage and storage of their data. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the participants' identities and were retracted with some politically-sensitive issues.

4. Unpacking the 'urban' in migrant urban citizenship

Student migrants' transnational identities significantly influenced their urban socio-spatial practices in Amsterdam. Participants' recounts highlighted the prevalence of transnational linkages, alluding to the multi-scalar and multi-local nature of the 'urban' in their claims to urban citizenship. Considering pandemic restrictions, many participants engaged with and contributed to the emergence of translocal micro-spaces transcending Amsterdam's territorial boundaries, spanning physical and digital spheres. Their arrival experiences were marked by situations that demonstrated deterritorialized Chinese social dynamics being reterritorialized in Amsterdam, highlighting the interplay between 'local' Chinese dynamics and contextual urban dynamics.

Between 2020 and 2021, incoming students' arrived amid tightened restrictions on education and public life in Amsterdam. A partial lockdown began in October 2020 and a resurgence of infections in July 2021 resulted in reimposing restrictions that continued into the fall. The measures coincided with participants' first weeks in the city, restricting their spatial practices. For most of them, it was which for most was their first visit to Amsterdam and abroad. They discussed the intricacies of adapting to unfamiliar environments, establishing social networks and developing routines. Institutional support is often crucial for international students' adjustment (Bender et al., 2019). Universities' cancelation of most in-person orientation activities created difficulties in adaptation and elicited feelings of disorientation with the city's novelty. Repeating daily routines is a starting point for place-attachments (Zisakou & Figgou, 2023). Recurrent socio-spatial practices enable the emergence of familiarity and belonging, which is dynamic and gradual (Felder, 2021, 180). Newcomers' initial urban encounters can be enduring and produce resonant attachments. Yang (22, graduate) offered an example of her unfamiliarity with seemingly fundamental aspects of Dutch daily life:

> "At the beginning, there was no place for me to visit or go with friends. I see the impact of supermarkets closing early. For example, when I walk on the street, I can learn that Dutch people do not hold umbrellas in the rain (…) But I would have to walk out the door to see the original Dutch way of life is like this, right?"

These nuances might seem banal initially, but they demonstrate the extent to which pandemic restrictions hampered the participants' initial engagement. As newcomers, understanding such nuances is integral to their connection to the city. The absence of the university campus space meant that Yang's exposure to the local environment was significantly more limited compared to migrants familiarized with their environment pre-pandemic. Claire (22, graduate), our interlocutor whose quote introduces our paper, describes Amsterdam's cityscapes as unintelligible. She explains that on the few days she went to campus, she would observe the city while cycling and feel that the "roads, the buildings, these houses, they all look so similar," expressing frustration at not "understanding" the city even after having lived there for a year.

Ritualistic practices foster familiarity, stability, and comfort, creating a sense of belonging and 'being at home' (Prazeres, 2018). By repeatedly engaging with spaces, individuals become familiar with contextual nuances and boundaries of their environments. When individuals situate themselves within the broader urban imaginary, they can experience belongingness in their new perceived 'homes' (Prazeres, 2018). Without university campuses being an anchor for students' routines, urban micro-spaces, like grocery stores and parks, emerged as alternative anchors. Bao (24, graduate) notes that grocery shopping gave them 'a sense of order' in his life:

> "During the pandemic, one could only walk around the canal, taking photos during the day, and stroll in the supermarket, without much interaction with this city."

Similarly, Yang's (22, graduate) recount also resembles Bao's, recalling:

> "I often took aimless walks near my home when the epidemic was not strictly controlled, I went to the park every day. Otherwise, I walked when the control was strict. I went to the supermarket and walked around the neighborhood and back."

Our participants lived in various neighborhoods in Amsterdam, mostly arranged pre-arrival with assistance from universities. Spatial practices varied in distance, frequency and nature. Variations were influenced by each locality's contextual conditions and individual subjectivities. Student housing complexes were central in the participants' urban socio-spatial engagement. But which Amsterdam? Where in Amsterdam? Densely populated with students, complexes such as *Little Manhattan Lelylaan* or *Uilenstede* became important student hubs during the pandemic, with physical campuses 'absent.'

In contrast with independent housing elsewhere in Amsterdam, student complexes and surrounding spaces became vital locales for recurring encounters and social interaction between students. While Amsterdam's housing shortage is infamous, participants did not face problems finding accommodation as most other international students opted to study online entirely. Hong (25, graduate) recalls:

> "My social circle was composed of classmates and neighbors living in the same building. Our building had over 200 Chinese people, out of the total of over 400 residents (…) We had a WeChat group because there were a lot of Chinese people. I feel like being in a courtyard house in Beijing, and the neighborhood."

Hong's comparison of the student housing with a Beijing courtyard house illustrates how migrants often acquire belonging in new environments with transnational referencing. Beijing courtyard houses are traditional houses, imagined as embodiments of Chinese families' traditional values and ethics. Beijing courtyard houses host multiple families, with integrated courtyards to provide extra living space. Hong's feeling of being in a courtyard house in Beijing, while being in the neighborhood, can therefore be understood as transnational, deterritorialized and reterritorialized meaning-making in building his new sense of home.

Hong's explanation underlines the digital sphere's role in community-building. WeChat (微信) is a popular multi-functional application widely used in China. Its features include text messaging, voice messaging, broadcasts, videocalls, gaming, e-payments, and image, video and location sharing. Chinese students continued to use WeChat as their core communication platform. The application's familiarity was convenient and comforting while building and managing their lives in an unfamiliar physical environment. It led, in many ways, the 'natural' coming together of Chinese students, navigating their new home city, both on- and offline. Yang (22, graduate) explains to us how her new life in Amsterdam connected to other Chinese people through the various WeChat groups:

> "We had a building WeChat group, which was my social circle at that time. There were also second-hand groups (二手群), house-rental groups (租房群), and groups built for online shopping."

Unlike other practices that were 'dislocated' during the pandemic, online communication became necessary. Pandemic liminality and imposed isolation intensified students' use of WeChat, remaining their primary medium for socializing. However, similar to Yang's umbrella example, limited exposure curtailed forms of engagement that could have incentivized using other social networks that are endemic in the Netherlands, like Twitter, Snapchat or Instagram. As digital social networks are sites of information-sharing, social engagement, and contextual knowledge (Li & Gong, 2022), digital platforms and practices can be crucial for students' adjustment. Isolation delayed or impeded the participants' adoption of 'unfamiliar' but 'local' planforms.

Many participants mentioned attending gatherings organized through WeChat, particularly heart-warming hotpot dinners with friends during the pandemic. Hotpot (火锅), which can be compared to fondue or barbeque, is a popular communal meal format in China. Friends and families gather around a pot of simmering soup stock, where raw ingredients are cooked as one likes. Hotpot is as much of a meal as a socializing event. People gather around the pot, eating, chatting, drinking, and enjoying the company. Participants reminisced about the hotpot dinners, remembering them as festive meals. Like Hong's reference to Beijing's courtyard houses, hotpot dinners facilitate newcomers' homemaking by recreating familiar aspects of home, away from home. The reterritorization of Chinese practices exemplify what Christou (2011, 250) refers to as 'reflexive communities,' which are spaces produced through routine practices that resemble those in the 'homeland.' In turn, they can contribute to the creation of 'affective spaces of home.' Collective experiences of and during liminal periods, such as the pandemic, can mediate 'intense experiences of communal togetherness' (Ural, 2023).

Transnational references and practices, like the Beijing courtyard house, hotpot and WeChat, cultivated communities of belonging that exemplified togetherness. However, tensions and identity politics were also de- and reterritorialized in Amsterdam. While discussing the variation in Chinese students' responses to the pandemic, Thomas (22, undergraduate) associated the differences to social divides in Chinese society:

> "It depends on which city you come from in China (…) there are some stereotypes about people who don't focus on the correct things (…) some people who come from Beijing Shanghai, those really advanced cities, those really developed cities, because you know in China you have these differences between cities even (…) but for me, my parents would tell me that I need to focus on my studies. I am not going to a bar or a dancefloor."

Thomas' reflection is an essential reminder that the Chinese student community is not heterogeneous. Socio-spatial divides between metropolitan and provincial cities and associated tensions, like hotpot and WeChat were reterritorialized in Amsterdam.

We also note other divides among the participants, particularly stemming from contrasting engagement with connections to the Chinese State. One participant expressed gratitude for financial support from the Association of Chinese students and Scholars in the Netherlands (ACSSNL) which is directly linked to the Chinese Embassy. The Association sent him out 'health kits' (健康包) in April 2020, also distributed by the Chinese State. The kits included surgical facemasks, N95 facemasks, hand sanitizers, anti-Covid-19 handbook, and Chinese medicine (Liana Qingwen Capsules 莲花清瘟胶囊), which were widely used to treat Covid-19 infections in China but unavailable elsewhere. The kits also included something 'for the soul,' such as letters and ancient Chinese poetry that conveyed care and love from the benevolent homeland. Recipients particularly appreciated receiving medical supplies amid global shortages. Our interlocutor noted that these packages 'made students feel like even during Covid, [their] country still cares about [them].' On the contrary, another participant expressed her paranoia upon receiving an unexpected call from the Chinese Embassy. Others considered the personal information needed for the care packages too detailed and became skeptical. The priority of care towards Chinese students also raised grievances among non-students, who regarded the Chinese State as unfair (Leung, 2022).

One new Twitter user participant said that seeing contrasting coverages of Chinese politics distressed her. Another participant recalled bitterly the 'battles' among Chinese students over the draconian 2022 Shanghai lockdown. She believes that increasing use of platforms like Instagram and Twitter aggravated disagreements, causing her to feel isolated. She said:

> "It was hard being in [social] isolation in a place where people have a very bad attitude about my own country… [The] feeling of being in pain is not universally shared among even Chinese people. Some people say that bad things are happening, but you cannot talk about it in a Western situation because they will speak shit about us. You defend your own country."

As a diverse community of individuals with intersecting identities such as gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, political affiliation, and ability, Chinese students hold diverse attitudes and subjective perceptions. Their various positionalities influence their social engagement with each other in Amsterdam, but also demonstrate that belongingness to different groups, in this case political, or scales can be more prominent in select situations. However, shedding light on these diversities does not assume that social differences in China are simply transposed to Amsterdam. Deterritorialization and reterritorialization entail the emergence of new meanings and interpretations resulting from their renegotiation in a new context. Belonging and citizenship should be understood in relation to the emotional geographies of space and time. Individual subjectivities are shaped by individuals' spatial and temporal situatedness within or in relation to the different scales of belonging. As the participant's recount shows, she felt especially isolated because the political tensions emerged in a Western context that is distant from 'home.'

Migration creates opportunities for new encounters with environments and people, co-nationals or not, eliciting renegotiations of identities and subjectivities. Claire's (22, graduate) experience is an example. She did not live in a student housing complex and recounted her experiences in the Bijlmermeer (or the *Bijlmer*), a peripheral Amsterdam neighborhood with large migrant communities. Once the site of 'futuristic' urban renewal in the 1960s for Amsterdam's middle class, Bijlmermeer was shunned by the intended residents due to multiple policy shortcomings discussed by Tattara & Migotto (2023). Instead, it housed post-colonial migrants from Suriname and the Dutch Antilles, whosettled there after independence from the Netherlands in the 1970s. Due to its affordability compared to Amsterdam's center, it was a suitable arrival destination and has retained this status since, with subsequent migrant communities also arriving there (Pinkster et al., 2020). Its 'migrant character' and failed policies that aimed at 'modernizing' the neighborhood contributed to its constructed 'ghettoization' in the Dutch imaginary (see Abdou, 2017; Pinkster et al., 2020). Popular socio-spatial imaginaries, often racialized, portray it as a 'problem neighborhood' associated with crime and materialize into spatial reality (Pinkster et al., 2020). The neighborhood's historical context is essential to understanding Claire's experiences, demonstrating the complexity existing socio-spatial imaginaries can create for new residents. Claire reflects on her experience as a new migrant in the neighborhood:

> "The first year of studying, I lived in Bijlmer. If you know that region, it's a place where Surinam people live, there's a large group of Black people and it was my first time getting close to them. I feel the staring from them (…) I had a pretty good impression about Black people

> after a few months, they sometimes stared but they never did anything offensive. There was an open market right next to Bijlmer. Everyone treated me nicely, and the woman treated me extra nicely because I am Chinese."

Claire discussed how in her first months, she always felt "someone was staring at her", which she connects to being seen as 'out of place' as a Chinese woman during intensified racist against Asians in the Netherlands. Living in a 'mixed' neighborhood and outside of student housing, Claire had to build her urban citizenship by relating to unfamiliar locals. Her narrative illustrates the power of nonverbal cues like staring and smiling can shape newcomers' emerging place-attachments. Claire's reference to a 'good impression' is a reflection of becoming more familiar, overcoming racialized societal stereotypes and initial discomfort with unfamiliar environments. Her 'fortunate' experience gaining a convivial sense of cannot be taken for granted. Throughout the pandemic, racialization and (micro)aggressions were widely experienced.

In a related research project, we collected testimonies from Chinese people in other Dutch cities. One participant, Gaby (21, student) who lived in Utrecht, shared her unpleasant experiences while doing her usual 'pandemic chore':

> "When I went to groceries with a face mask on those days [first wave of the pandemic in 2020], many children and teenagers ran away once they saw me. When I was on the street, people often yelled 'Corona' and 'China' at me. This was quite normal, and I really got used to it…"

Gaby's quote demonstrates that while familiarity is a prerequisite for belongingness emerging, familiarity does not always entail belonging. Despite being familiar with a place or practices, or micro-aggressions in Gaby's case, negative emotional associations can still lead to exclusion and a sense of non-belonging. Many interlocutors chose to avoid spaces of potential racialization and aggression, which they often perceived as epidemiologically risky, instead opting to shop online or visit Asian supermarkets. Several participants mentioned that they felt a sense of home and safety in Asian supermarkets.

The transnational dimension of our interlocutors' quest for belonging and citizenship in Amsterdam is also illustrated by their in-betweenness between two diverging pandemic regimes. When restrictions were first tightened, Chinese students' attitudes towards restrictions in the Netherlands, though not uniform, largely mirrored those they had in China. Initially, participants emulated the stringent and highly cautious approach in China, which they perceive to be in stark contrast with the relatively more 'relaxed' attitude in the Netherlands. Pandemic restrictions in the Netherlands were relatively laxer compared to other contexts. For example, it was one of the last European countries to mandate masks, only requiring them indoors in December 2020, and were otherwise advisory. In Amsterdam, masks were worn infrequently unless mandated. This can be attributed to a high trust in government, a strong societal emphasis on individual autonomy, and conflicting misinformation about efficacy of masks early in the pandemic. The participants' continued adherence to Chinese pandemic protocol influenced their spatial practices in Amsterdam. Initially, they only engaged in 'in-house' activities, such as online gaming or meals with housemates and partners. This was driven by their heightened fear of infection and limited the range of their social and spatial practices. Discussing the contrast in societal attitudes, Yin (24, graduate) recalled how she only went out once or twice weekly as "her whole life was in fear in China" which she compared to "everyone here did not care that much" even when infections were at their highest. Students like Yin avoided social interaction and instead frequented open-air spaces or stayed home. There was a gradual change in some participants' attitudes. For example, Hong (25, graduate) initially avoided going to the university library, the only open facility, to avoid infection. He started going to the library regularly after contracting Covid-19, which made him "not care anymore." Claire (22, graduate) also initially declined social invitations, including one to a party in the complex. She was convinced to attend by her roommate, who argued that staying home is futile since they lived in shared accommodation. She recounts: 'I quickly forgot about all the lessons my parents had told me like 'wear your mask all the time.' She adapted to being looser with restrictions and felt less 'strange'. Claire shared that it even felt "warming", remembering how her friends and she constantly checked in on each other after contracting Covid-19 that night.

As transnational migrants, the participants straddled between different pandemic regimes. This state of liminality, or living in a 'place between places' (Bell, 2021), can cause discomfort but also offer choices, indicating 'elective' belonging (Antonsich, 2010). All participants 'traveled' between homes in transnational space, perceiving the dynamic sociocultural and pandemic environments and adapting their socio-spatial practices accordingly. They negotiated their translocal citizenship between consideration of their past experiences, parents' advice, and narratives regarding infection from China, and their desire to fit in and engage more freely in their new home cities in the Netherlands. The city felt more familiar as they frequented new spaces and had more social interaction.

5. The centrality of temporalities in migrant urban citizenship

We demonstrated how migrant urban citizenship is constituted of complex spatial processes that transcend beyond being merely urban. Now, we center temporalities in examining the temporal dimension of urban citizenship. In the previous section, newcomer student migrants' sense and performance of citizenship evolved with time, with the participants' ability to and desire for socio-spatial engagement also evolving alongside contextual changes, such as pandemic restrictions, or personal circumstances, such as being infected with Covid-19.

Some participants' descriptions of time were very telling about their experiences. Some recounted feelings of loneliness, where the passage of time 'seemed frozen,' as Zihao (24, graduate) described it. Claire (22, graduate) said she "had a very heavy time. I was studying all the time, but also a very heavy time." She added that she had been constantly waiting to get Covid since the end of the pandemic was not in sight. Zihao also recalled the impact of prolonged waiting. He recalled the surreal feeling when he stepped outside of the student housing for the first time when restrictions finally loosened. Others perceived time differently during the pandemic. Thomas (22, undergraduate), emphasizing his priorities, described his perception of time:

> "For me, it was not that bad actually. I am here to study and that is my priority. As long I can do that offline or online, it is not a problem and so far, …I passed all the courses. I did not feel the strong impact [of the pandemic] compared to what [he] heard from some colleagues."

Identity is relational to both space and time (Li & Gong, 2022). The peculiar temporal context created by the pandemic underlined the participants' experience of time. Liminality is negotiated in relation to space, time and self (Thomassen et al., 2015). In addition to experiencing liminality spatially, participants also experienced temporal liminality or the 'moment between moments' (Bell, 2021). Residing in Amsterdam temporarily, the participants live in uncertainty about life post-graduation. For some, this period of temporariness produced feelings of insecurity and uncertainty, preventing 'emotional investment' in belonging (Zisakou & Figgou, 2023). While residing legally, those experiencing liminality can feel isolated and lonely (Antonsich, 2010). Others, who do not intend on staying in the Netherlands after their studies, might be reluctant to build a sense of belonging through active participation. Many of our research participants expressed their wish to remain in The Netherlands after graduating, driven by career opportunities or to avoid the restrictions on freedoms in China. Their wish to stay does not, however, translate necessarily to increased socio-spatial

engagement. Since securing employment after graduation can be relatively difficult, especially within the one-year timeframe of the Dutch 'job-search visa', some prioritized the job search and employability over socio-spatial engagement during their temporary residence, diminishing the emergence of belongingness.

6. Politics of urban citizenship: corona-racism and contestations to belonging

Finally, we would like to bring our discussion to politics of belonging and its impact on Chinese students' quest for urban citizenship. As alluded in the previous sections, incidents of racialized violence and discrimination against individuals racialized as Asian were typical during the pandemic. Many such incidents were reported in The Netherlands, including Amsterdam, containing accounts of verbal and physical violence in public spaces (Leung, 2022). As we have shown, racialized violence and micro-aggression contribute to victims' heightened vigilance and behavioral changes in urban spaces (see also (Amer & Leung, 2023). Multiple participants discussed experiencing more racist violence in public spaces while wearing face masks when it was not enforced in the Netherlands. Not surprisingly, these experiences inhibit emergence of belonging and familiarity (Felder, 2021). Anne (25, graduate) shared with us several racist assaults that she experienced, ranging from being scolded for wearing a mask to shouted with racist slurs in public. She recalls one incident:

> "I was walking around the street, there was a drunk guy around 50 (…) As we walked, he kept screaming 'Chinese virus' and something else I couldn't understand. I remember exactly where it was in the center of Amsterdam (…) I wanted to remember a landmark."

These acts made her feel unsafe. Her story also illustrates how it can be even more stressful when such assaults take place in an unfamiliar place. For Anne, being able to locate the incident was significant. Yet, it was difficult as she could not recognize the exact place, echoing Claire's comment (in the opening quote of this paper) about Amsterdam being unintelligible. Claire noted that she would constantly feel too visible with people staring. She explains:

> "I am a Chinese girl with an Asian face, and I wore a mask all the time whenever I went to supermarket or university or when I was on the metro. They stared. They were always staring and looking at me directly. I tried not to think about this."

Avoidance was not always possible. Claire also noted that she regularly experienced people signaling her to remove her mask in the supermarket or metro. As previously explained, masks-wearing was infrequent when not mandatory. Unless mandated, wearing a mask was 'noticeable' and sometimes seen as a violation of 'micro-tones of place-based, locally-contingent modes of civility and codes of conduct' (Ye, 2019, 485). This alludes to the socially-enforced Dutch mentality of *'doe normaal'* (be/act normal), which frowns upon deviations from the 'norm'. Racialized individuals' hypervisibility in public is heightened by the public perception of mask-wearing as 'non-normal'. Such 'misconduct' by racialized others often attracted unwanted attention and reactions by locals and other 'others' – as assaults by other ethnic groups against the Chinese were also often reported (Leung et al., forthcoming)(, ranging staring to verbal aggression like 'teaching' them how to behave 'correctly'.

Politics of belonging have spatial implications. Bao (25, graduate) and Yang (22, graduate) are just two of our interlocutors who explicitly explained that one of the main reasons to shop in Asian supermarkets and grocery stores was to avoid racism. Shopping in these spaces felt safer and eased homesickness among these newcomers whose experiences made them feel out of place. As such, these ethnic home-away-from-home spaces served multiple purposes that were comforting for these young migrants who were denied citizenship in other urban spaces. This practice demonstrates that practices are situational and relational. The participants' decisions to visit Asian supermarkets did not only arise from perceived cultural affinity, but also as a reaction to (the risk of) exclusionary discrimination elsewhere. However, their decisions facilitated belongingness to also emerge within such spaces. It presents an interesting case of duality, where Asian supermarkets were associated with affinitive safety shaped, at times, by racist exclusion.

Confronted with racism, Chinese students claim urban citizenship in ways varying from avoidance to 'living with it,' or they revert to their comfortable 'ethnic' spaces. Anne discussed how experiencing racism in public motivated her to join one of the two 2021 'Stop Asian Hate' protests held at *Museumplein*, a prominent square in Amsterdam. Anne notes: 'It's rare for Asian people, especially East Asian people to do a demonstration like this, especially at this scale.' The two demonstrations comprised hundreds of people, mostly Chinese and Asians but also people of other ethnic groups, 'Dutch' and other migrant groups. Mostly considered a silent and invisible minority, the Chinese/Asian community stood up during the pandemic to show resistance. The protests demonstrate how discursive spaces can emerge out of marginalization, with collectivized action against racism created a new space for the Chinese/Asian community. Occupying Museumplein, which has a history of protests, temporarily produced a reflexive space that can foster subjectivities and collectivities based on solidarity and shared experiences. One of the protestors, Gaby (21, student, Utrecht) called it a 'moment of Asians' in Amsterdam. Another demonstrator, Wang (27, student) also appreciates the transnational nature of solidarity:

> "The most memorable moment (of the first protest) is that an African lady appealed to the crowd to do something when anyone, whatever the ethnic background, is bullied on a bus or other places. It was very powerful. Racial discrimination does not only happen to Chinese but to every minority" (cited in (Leung et al., forthcoming).

Linked to the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, the 'Stop Asian Hate' protests were a part of the transnational anti-racist discourses and activism. Many individuals express a sense of belonging to the global activist movement, which resonates with their localized personal experiences. This global-local connection points towards the increased fluidity of the scales of belong, with where Corona-induced Anti-Asian racism was a global phenomenon that was 'localized' and experienced by individuals, facilitated through digital spaces. The experiences, challenges, and resistance of and by our participants will, like sediments, add to the layers of collective memories, challenges and resistance.

Many imagine that the pandemic engendered Anti-Asian racism. While the pandemic became the stage on which a significant increase in anti-Asian violence took place, the underlying racist sentiments were not new and evolved from historical legacies of coloniality (Ruiter, 2021; Wu, 2020). Asians have always been subject to covert and overt forms of racism, which othered, fetishized and stereotyped them, even as a 'model minority'. These experiences show how the politics of belonging can be racialized and exclusionary. Racialization, as a contestation to belongingness, can impose perpetual liminality into racialized bodies, who are perceived as 'unfamiliar', 'unbelonging' and 'strange', through the constant renegotiation of their belongingness. These dynamics create differential belonging regimes.

7. Conclusions

Drawing on the participants' challenging arrival and homemaking experiences, we underline the complexity of the affective dimension of citizenship arising from the emotional facets that shape it. We argue that belongingness as a feeling, along with familiarity, are proxies of migrant urban citizenship. Building on Yuval-Davis' (2006) delineation of belonging between sense of belonging and politics of belonging, we illustrate with the lived experiences of our interlocutors the mutually constitutive nature of both aspects of belonging. Subjectivities are key in the performance, negotiation and contestation of belonging and citizenship, embedded in processes that occur in specific temporal-spatialities. Individuals have varying scales of belonging and different

identity-related subjectivities that allow of multiplicities of belonging. Belongingness is negotiated and shaped by individuals' positionality and spatiotemporal coordinates.

We unpacked the 'urban' through understanding participants' imaginaries Amsterdam. They did not speak of Amsterdam as a coherent city, but instead attached particular meanings to micro-spaces. Their practicing of belonging and citizenship was meaningful in these spaces. Notable places such as their flats, which hosted hotpot dinners, housing complexes, which became anchors in the absence of universities, neighborhoods, where they experienced convivial encounters with neighbors, or Museumplein, where they asserted their claim to citizenship in protest of racialized violence. These spaces were influenced by transnational processes and the de/reterritorialization of relations in new contexts. Micro-spaces were not always welcoming, with participants experiencing racist aggression in supermarkets and public transport, contesting their belongingness. The participants' transnational identities mediating the recontextualization of Chinese sociopolitical and cultural processes in Amsterdam, linked to scales that ranged from the family to the Chinese state. Socio-spatial divides between students, such as between bigger or smaller cities or political affiliations, have a traveling power and are recontextualized. The transnationalism of anti-racist urban activism at the time created linkages between protests in Amsterdam and the United States, pointing towards transnational solidarities.

The liminality lens uncovered contextual nuances that mediated the participants experiences. Understanding the pandemic as a liminal period offered nuanced explanation of the uncertainty and insecurity it produced resulting from 'dislocating' of existing structures without future clarity. Liminality also elucidated the complex interplay between subjective and spatiotemporal processes in which their engagements are embedded. Being in-between places, such as 'former' and 'new' homes, and moments, illustrated by the temporary residence in the city imbued liminal uncertainty in their experiences. This instability elicited different socio-spatial practices that varied in nature, impacting their belongingness. However, as we illustrated throughout the paper, the quest of belonging and citizenship is not only about the present and imagined future. How a particular ethnic(ized) group is seen and treated by others is also shaped by factors beyond those bounded in the perimeter of a particular institutional space (e.g., university campus, student complex), neighborhood, city, or country. As society moves on from the pandemic, we can see how contemporary global political tensions and interstate rivalries can be embodied in lived experiences. For instance, the Dutch Government recently announced the intention to screen Chinese tech students on security suspicions (Bounds, 2023). Amid these tensions, the diaspora carries the burden of being perceived as affiliates or representatives of 'global China.'

We have, however, observed new elements in claiming urban citizenship among migrants and people seen as such. One prominent factor is the digital sphere's ubiquitous reach. Contestation of belonging and citizenship takes place nowadays online as much as offline, as they are permeated by the same sociopolitical processes. The two seemingly separate spaces intertwine and conflate, constituting each other. We are both disturbed by the potentially subversive power of the digital as a medium for violence, and find the level of digital activism in pushing a pro-rights agenda in the digital realm promising. The digital offers new spaces that linger longer than actions in physical spaces, such as demonstrations, in advocating anti-racism claims. Instagram accounts, Facebook pages, and WeChat groups were formed during the pandemic. Many of them continue to exist and fight, often more creatively and artistically, against anti-Asian racism.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Aly Amer: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Maggi W.H. Leung:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Yiwen Wang:** Project administration, Investigation, Data curation. **Yanbo Hao:** Methodology, Investigation, Data curation.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A. Research participants

Pseudonym	Age range	Gender	Level of education (in Amsterdam)
Chang	20–24	Male	Undergraduate
Yang	20–24	Female	Graduate
Feng	20–24	Male	Undergraduate
Kai	25–29	Male	Graduate
Yin	20–24	Female	Graduate
Claire	20–24	Female	Graduate
Zihao	25–29	Male	Graduate
Jake	25–29	Male	Graduate
Anne	25–29	Female	Graduate
Thomas	20–24	Male	Undergraduate
Hong	25–29	Male	Graduate
Wen	25–29	Female	Graduate
Shu	NA	Female	Undergraduate
Mei	20–24	Female	Graduate
Ming	25–29	Female	Graduate
Bao	20–24	Male	Graduate

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