

Between haven and heaven in cities: A comparison between Beijing (China) and Utrecht (the Netherlands)

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Abstract

Although heterogeneity exists, Western countries can generally be characterised by a more individualistic orientation, whereas China is a more collectivist-oriented society that is undergoing a transformation. This empirical study examined socio-cultural differences between cities in China and the Netherlands in terms of companionship and urban meeting places on the basis of activity diary surveys conducted in the metropolitan areas of Beijing and Utrecht. The focus was on activity decision-making in daily life, especially on the meaning of ‘feeling at home’. Companionship and relevant meeting places were controlled for socio-demographics, analysed and compared in both metropolitan areas. The results show that in Beijing, the majority of activities are undertaken with members of the nuclear and extended family, and the home (‘haven’) is a place for intimate contacts with family members. In Utrecht, the share of individual activities and activities undertaken with friends is much higher than in Beijing, and the home (‘heaven’) is open for contacts with self-selected friends. The modelling results indicate that socio-cultural differences work through various socio-demographic variables, such as gender, family structure and educational level, providing some insights for policymakers.

Keywords

China, companionship, home, the Netherlands, urban meeting place

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Introduction

China is undergoing an extraordinarily rapid transition (Chai, 2013; Ma, 2002). This transition is not only characterised by rapid economic growth and urbanisation (CSB, 2000–2011), measured by the rise in the share of urban population and by the expansion of urban space, but it is also related to the nature of urban life, influenced by increased average incomes, growth in car ownership and massive investments in public transport (CSB, 2000–2011; Feng et al., 2013). However, living in a city means much more than just having an urban residence. In their daily lives, urban residents are exposed to fragmented, temporary and often messy contacts with unfamiliar people and animate and inanimate entities in public life (Dijst, 2014; Jacobs, 1961; Neal, 2013). On a large scale, people living in Western countries have experienced these types of contacts since the 21st century. This urbanisation process is taking place in a context of modernisation, which represents the erosion of traditional patterns of dependency and interaction and the (re)negotiation and construction by individuals of their relations with changing environments (Bauman, 2000). Instead of traditional institutions, such as the local community and the family, individuals strive for their own identity and emphasise personal networks of friends (Bauman, 2000). As a consequence, Western countries largely show individualistic traits, such as personal freedom and rights, self-reliance and the pursuit of personal interests (Hofstede, 2001). The development and maintenance of personal networks is highly supported by the extensive supply of transport and communication infrastructure, high density and the mixture of public meeting places in cities (Carrasco and Miller, 2009).

Urbanisation and modernity are transforming the social and cultural landscape of

China, too (Su, 2014). The persistent rural to urban migration that has occurred over the last 30 years in China (Fan et al., 2011) has increasingly physically detached people from their families and local communities, leading them to encounter different values and norms in cities. As a result of increasing private affluence, higher education, mobility and mass media, the younger Chinese generation is beginning to accept exotic cultures and appears to have become more individualistic (Cao, 2009). However, despite these changes, it appears that China can still be characterised as a rather collectivist-oriented society in which group goals have priority and behaviour is guided by norms, obligations and duties towards family and community (Fan, 2003; Oyserman and Lee, 2008). These social and cultural orientations can be largely traced back to the metaphysical and moral doctrine of Confucianism (Chen and Fan, 2010), which is still upheld in East Asian countries (Inoguchi and Shin, 2009). An expression of this collectivistic orientation in China is the strong presence of extended family households (Feng et al., 2013; Logan and Bian, 1999).

Although a deep understanding of the impact of dominant cultural orientations on companionship and the choice of urban meeting places is relevant for societies that are undergoing transformation, very little is known about this issue. This paper addresses this lacuna by addressing the two related issues. We conducted an empirical study to explore the differences between people in urban China (a representative society where social relations are more collectivist-oriented and that is undergoing drastic transformation) and the Netherlands (a country with a more individualistic orientation) in choices regarding companionship and places to meet. The study was based on activity diary data from the metropolitan areas of Beijing and Utrecht. We applied descriptive statistics and multi-nominal logit models to

investigate the decision-making related to companionship and place.

Literature review

Cultural, structural and perhaps biological factors influence the intimacy of relationships. In general, strong ties among relatives intersect with the norm that 'blood is thicker than water'. As a consequence, in most societies relatives are the group that dominates the personal network and provides voluntary help (Farquhar and Zhang, 2005; Wellman and Wortley, 1990). Non-kinship groups are also ranked differently; that is, friends with whom one has long-term contacts are closer than colleagues who are temporarily connected by organisational ties (Mollenhorst et al., 2008).

In China, Confucianism has led family members to have a prominent position in social networks (Fan, 2003). This importance is reflected in the ubiquitous presence of extended family households in China. A family survey in five Chinese cities conducted in 2008 showed that 13.9% of all households comprised more than two generations and that 49.2% of newly married children had chosen to live with their parents (Ma et al., 2011). These phenomena are associated with the Confucian concept of filial piety (*xiao*) (Zhan and Montgomery, 2003) or intergenerational reciprocity (Chen and Silverstein, 2000; Lee et al., 2005). However, the notion of 'intimacy from a distance' is gaining influence in modern Chinese families. People like to live separately with physical proximity, which allows the provision of regular assistance and intergenerational sociality (Klocker et al., 2012; Li and Shin, 2013). Both models of extended households promote the close connection between adult children and elderly parents.

Family relationships in the West are different from those in China. Christian norms originally encouraged collectivistic and

family-oriented socialisation. Since the Second World War, however, the decline in religious beliefs and the spread of liberal and modern values have led Western countries to undergo strong individualisation and emancipation processes (Komter and Knijn, 2006; Oyserman and Lee, 2008). The primary function of the family in the Netherlands today is giving birth to and raising children (Aassve et al., 2013). Younger generations begin to form their moral norms in personal networks that primarily consist of non-kin, such as friends, neighbours and colleagues (Phan et al., 2009; Wellman and Wortley, 1990). Despite the still substantial strength of family ties in the Netherlands, these ties have weakened (Komter and Knijn, 2006).

Interpersonal relationships between non-kin might be different between China and Western countries. Traditionally, strict norms have existed in different social contexts in China, such as among kin and non-kin. Ties with friends or colleagues do not easily become trustful and strong compared with those with family members. In social networks, friends, former classmates or colleagues are sometimes present, but their share is often low or their relevance is secondary to family members (Logan and Bian, 1999; Wellman and Wortley, 1990). However, because of modernisation, urbanisation and individualisation processes in China, the importance of these relations might have changed by now. In the Netherlands, these processes have led to a more individualistic cultural orientation in which strong ties with friends have a higher probability of developing (Phan et al., 2009; Wellman and Wortley, 1990).

These cultural differences in the intimacy of the relationships might have an impact on the places where people meet. One of these places is the home. 'Home is being established around particular relationships to people and objects' (Massey, 2007: 81). In 2011, the Dutch sociologist Jan-Willem

Duyvendak published his book *The Politics of Home*, in which he distinguishes between two dimensions of feeling at home in 'known' (familiar) places: home as 'haven' and home as 'heaven'. Secure, safe, comfortable, private and exclusive are the most important characteristics of 'haven'. In that respect, the house in which one lives is seen as an important place in which to interact with people one trusts and is intimate with and to experience an emotional attachment. In China, the home is often associated with rootedness or a place of origin (Su, 2014) when meeting with families. 'Heaven' is a public place where one can express and realise oneself collectively: 'Home here embodies shared histories; a material and/or symbolic place with one's own people and activities' (Duyvendak, 2011: 38). In daily urban life in the Netherlands, people will often swing between these places and the meanings of feeling at home so that both friends and family members are welcomed into their private homes.

In addition to the private home, other important places are found in urban public space. The growth of large cities has had an impact on the nature of social relationships. Especially for urban migrants in China, the strong and enduring bonds between family members and close friends are being gradually replaced by weak, temporary and instrumental relationships among strangers (Neal, 2013). The everyday activities taking place in the streets and on the sidewalks of neighbourhoods or within recreational amenities such as museums and parks are essential to a fast-paced, highly mobile urban lifestyle (Jacobs, 1964; Neal, 2013). A lack of public meeting places might lead to people living more alone, becoming suspicious towards strangers or feeling unsafe (Mollenhorst et al., 2008; Orum and Neal, 2009). With a lack of good and affordable means of transport and communication, it is hard to maintain intimate relationships with others living

at a distance (Carrasco and Miller, 2009). This difficulty might especially be the case in China, where dramatic urban developments and transformations are occurring. Messy contacts with unfamiliar people in cities might cause a lack of social trust in others in general. These messy contacts might also have a negative effect on the trust in friends and colleagues in comparison with family members. As a consequence, there is a higher chance of meeting friends or colleagues in urban public locations instead of private homes because these locations allow people to maintain a distance from one another (Seo and Chiu, 2014). The situation in the Netherlands appears to be different: urban public meeting places are important for maintaining both intimate and non-intimate relationships (Hampton et al., 2014; Mollenhorst et al., 2008).

Differences in the type of companionship and meeting places might also be related to socio-demographics. *Gender* is considered to be an important variable in the choice of companion and meeting place. First, women are more focused than men on providing emotional support and maintaining social networks (Komter and Knijn, 2006; Wellman and Wortley, 1990). Second, in traditional cultures women dominate the domestic space (Cao and Chai, 2007), which is expressed in their home-related activities, such as picking up young children from school and caring for the elderly. We expect that because of this orientation, women choose to interact with family members more often in their own homes.

Studies show that life events influence the evolution of personal social networks and can affect the choice of companion and place (Bidarta and Lavenu, 2005). For example, the start of a romantic relationship or the birth of a child may lead to the shrinking of social networks and to participation in more activities at home with members of the nuclear family (Carrasco and

Miller, 2009; Carrasco et al., 2008). It has also been shown that the elderly tend to have fewer social contacts compared with younger and middle-aged groups (Cornwell, 2011). Increasing educational and income levels may lead to larger financial and socio-cultural opportunities to live a more individualised life independent of others. Owing to the greater geographical dispersion of suitable employment and homes, more highly educated persons may have fewer opportunities to meet with their children and relatives (Komter and Knijn, 2006).

This brief review of the literature on the cultural and social impacts of interpersonal relationships and meeting places highlights the potential value of comparing companionship and urban meeting places between different dominant cultures. Although there is also much room for heterogeneity in social network orientations, we hypothesise that the differences in ties are manifested in the nature of companionship in daily life: in comparison with the Netherlands, we expect people in urban China to have more contact with family members and less contact with friends. We also hypothesise that

collectivistic and individualistic orientations are reflected in the use of private homes and public places in cities: Chinese people will meet family members more often at home and their friends in urban public places, whereas the Dutch will not discriminate between home and urban public places when meeting friends and family. Relating the dominant cultural orientations and socio-demographic attributes to the nature of companionship and meeting places in cities leads to the conceptual model displayed in Figure 1.

Research design

We have chosen the metropolitan areas of Utrecht (Netherlands) and Beijing (China). Both urbanised areas are relatively large and, more important, can be treated as good representatives of urbanised areas belonging to individualistic and collectivist-oriented societies in transition, respectively. The Utrecht metropolitan area (1.2 million inhabitants) belongs to the Randstad Holland (with 6.7 million inhabitants living in an area covering 6400 km²). The Utrecht

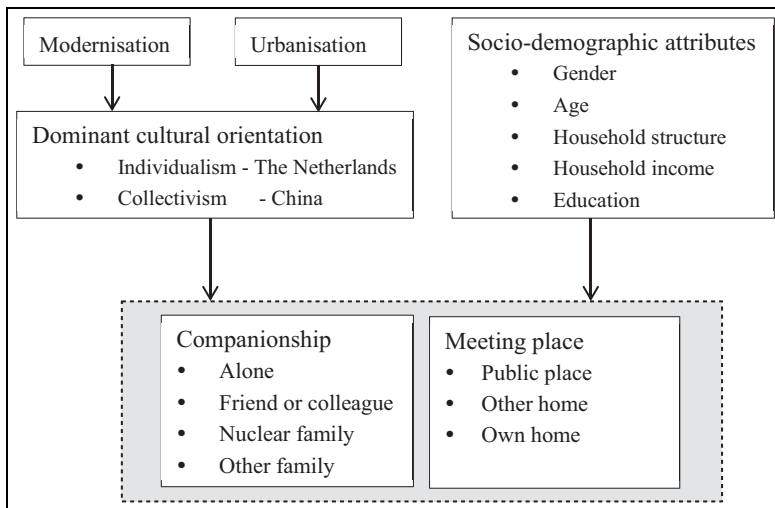


Figure 1. Schematic presentation of conceptual model.

metropolitan area is characterised by a high level of urbanisation, modernity and individualistic lifestyle orientations. Increased individualism, lack of solidarity with disadvantaged groups and the erosion of moral values are seen as important social problems by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (Dijst, 2014). These individualistic orientations in the Utrecht metropolitan area are very important for the objective of this paper and are in different from those in Beijing. Owing to a large rural–urban migration, Beijing (home to a population of 11.7 million in 2010 inside the Fifth Ring Road of 667 km²) is rapidly growing and belongs to a country that, compared with the Netherlands, is a more collectivist-oriented but rapidly modernising society.

The two surveys that we apply in our empirical analysis were independently conducted in Beijing and Utrecht but show large similarities. In Beijing, we selected ten neighbourhoods that differ in location, size and socio-economic composition of the residents and are generally classified as traditional residential areas, traditional danwei compounds, reformed danwei communities, commodity housing communities and social welfare housing. The sample of neighbourhoods represents the general pattern of residents' daily behaviour in Beijing after considering broad categories of housing (Wang et al., 2011). Within each neighbourhood, we randomly selected 60 households. In October 2007, we asked adults belonging to these households to complete an activity diary over two days; this diary was combined with face-to-face interviews and questionnaires. The data set finally comprised two-day activity-travel diary data from 520 households comprised of 1119 individuals. In the Utrecht metropolitan area, a survey was conducted in the period February–July 2007 that concerned single- and dual-earner households living in the

Utrecht–Amersfoort–Hilversum triangle. A total of 26 neighbourhoods were selected that cover the full spectrum of existing income, density and accessibility classes in the area. Within each neighbourhood, we selected addresses at random, using digital files containing all street addresses. In total, 742 respondents completed a two-day combined activity, travel and communication diary and a questionnaire.

From the original data sets, we made the following selection: (1) participants included gender, age and income information (20 in Beijing and 18 in Utrecht excluded); (2) participants completed the diary for two days and conducted at least one discretionary activity (303 in Beijing and 49 in Utrecht excluded); and (3) participants provided accurate information on companionship and meeting places (eight in Beijing and 61 in Utrecht excluded). Thus, usable diary data from 788 individuals in Beijing and 614 in Utrecht were selected for our analysis.

For the selected sample, we summarise the basic sample profile (Table 1). As expected, household compositions in Beijing and Utrecht are completely different. In Beijing, large households (e.g. parents living with adult children) and extended households comprise 45% of the total number of households. In Utrecht, the percentage of one-person households is much higher than in Beijing, where couples and nuclear families are much more prevalent. Because there is a substantial difference in income levels between Beijing and Utrecht, we categorised them separately in both data sets.

To analyse the choice of companionship and meeting places, we selected only non-work-related activities. Work-related activities are often compulsory, which means that people have less control over with whom and at which locations they engage in joint activities.

We divided the social circles into four categories:

Table 1. Sample profile.

Beijing		Frequency	%	Utrecht	
				Frequency	%
Total		788	100	614	100
Gender	Female	385	48.9	344	56.0
	Male	403	51.1	270	44.0
Age	20–29	81	10.3	51	8.3
	30–39	253	32.1	124	20.2
	40–49	204	25.9	174	28.3
	50–59	194	24.6	193	31.4
	60 +	56	7.1	72	11.7
Education	Low	82	10.4	22	3.6
	Mid	203	25.8	186	30.3
	High	503	63.8	406	66.1
Household structure	Single person	23	2.9	Single person	122
	Couple	176	22.3	Couple	218
	Nuclear family	237	30.1	Nuclear family	245
	Parents with adult children ^a	220	27.9	Other	29
	Extended family ^b	132	16.8		4.7
Income ^c	< 300	177	22.5	< 1000	12
	300–500	195	24.7	1000–2000	128
	500–700	186	23.6	2000–3000	174
	700–1000	126	16.0	3000–4000	159
	> 1000	95	12.1	> 4000	131

Notes: ^aChildren are over 18 years old or married, and living with their parents.

^bNuclear family + grandparents.

^cIn euros (exchange rate in 2007).

- (a) alone
- (b) nuclear family: partner and children living in the same household
- (c) other family: parents, grandparents and siblings
- (d) friend or colleague: any person without any blood or marriage link with whom individuals have a good relationship and frequent interactions.

We distinguished between three types of meeting places: own home, homes of others and public places.

Descriptive analysis

Table 2 shows the nature of companionship and meeting places in both metropolitan

areas. The percentages represent the share of companionship for each type of meeting place. The ‘total’ column shows that participants in Beijing tend to perform activities more often with the nuclear family and other family members. Participants in Utrecht conduct more activities alone or with self-selected friends.

For activities taking place in one’s own home, members of the nuclear family are the primary companions in both metropolitan areas. Studies show that immediate kin dominate the core network (Plickert et al., 2007), supported by evidence of joint activities with members of the nuclear family at home. In Utrecht, a relatively large percentage of activities occur alone. Members of the extended family households conduct

Table 2. Companionship and meeting places in Beijing and Utrecht.

	Alone		Nuclear family		Other family		Friend		Colleague		Total Abs. (= 100%)
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	
<i>Beijing</i>											
Home	1236	29.9	2338	56.6	508	12.3	44	1.1	2	0	4128
Other's home	2	1.7	43	36.1	55	46.2	14	11.8	5	4.2	119
Leisure facility	161	28.8	244	43.6	33	5.9	96	17.2	25	4.5	559
Restaurant	23	10.5	46	20.9	16	7.3	46	20.9	89	40.5	220
Service facility ^a	69	58.5	24	20.3	11	9.3	8	6.8	6	5.1	118
Shop	221	46.1	195	40.7	30	6.3	24	5	9	1.9	479
Total	1712	30.4	2890	51.4	653	11.6	232	4.1	136	2.4	5623
<i>Utrecht</i>											
Home	2265	43.1	2680	51	111	2.1	201	3.8	2	0	5259
Other's home	20	4.3	174	37.3	104	22.3	141	30.2	28	6	467
Leisure facility	76	21.7	87	24.8	23	6.6	159	45.3	6	1.7	351
Restaurant	9	6.8	38	28.6	5	3.8	56	42.1	25	18.8	133
Service facility	49	71	12	17.4	2	2.9	6	8.7	0	0	69
Shop	450	67.3	183	27.4	12	1.8	21	3.1	3	0.4	669
- Grocery shop	292	77	76	20.1	1	0.3	8	2.1	2	0.5	379
- Other shop	158	54.5	107	36.9	11	3.8	13	4.5	1	0.3	290
Total	2869	41.3	3174	45.7	257	3.7	584	8.4	64	0.9	6948

Note: ^aBank, post office, town hall, library, etc.

activities together in Beijing probably related to the prevalence of extended households in China (Logan and Bian, 1999), whereas in Utrecht, friends are engaged more at home. Regarding activities in the homes of others, other family members offer the primary source of companionship in Beijing, whereas their counterpart is primarily members of the nuclear family and secondarily friends in Utrecht.

For activities in public urban spaces, we distinguished between leisure facilities, restaurants, service facilities and shops (both grocery and non-grocery shops). Members of the nuclear family in Beijing engage together more often at leisure facilities, whereas friends appear more together at these facilities in Utrecht. In restaurants, colleagues are more likely to accompany participants in Beijing because of their daily proximity, whereas friends are an important group for this venue in Utrecht. Though restaurants can be regarded as an extension of homely life or an important socialising place in China, participants in this study show convenient choices rather than family-orientation. In both metropolitan areas, participants conduct relatively more activities alone at service facilities and in shops. In Utrecht, it is possible to make a distinction between grocery and non-grocery shopping: grocery products are particularly bought alone, whereas the purchase of non-grocery products (e.g. clothes and house decorations) is an activity more often performed with members of the nuclear family.

Table 2 shows that in both metropolitan areas, approximately three-quarters of the contacts occur in the homes of the participants. Table 3 further shows in percentages people's use of places when they perform non-work activities outside the home. The 'total' column in Table 3 shows that in Beijing, the most often-visited place is leisure facilities, followed by shops. The homes of others are rarely visited. When they are

visited, activities are performed with family members who do not belong to the nuclear family. In Utrecht, people perform most activities in shops; the homes of others come in second. These activities in the homes of others are performed with members of the nuclear family and with friends and even colleagues. These differences in frequencies reflect the diverging concepts of home in China and Western countries: in China, a home is much more private and is visited by kin but rarely by friends. The Chinese see their homes as 'havens' (Duyvendak, 2011). Homes in the Netherlands are much more open to friends with whom one might share common values and norms.

Companionship often takes place within the context of a household where partners and children (and in China, even grandparents) can be present. In Table 4, the percentages represent the share of companionship for each type of household. The patterns are largely similar for both metropolitan areas. As one might expect, single participants tend to perform activities independently or, when seeking companionship, relatively more often with friends. Couples and nuclear families tend to participate in joint activities with partners and/or children. Family obligations or preferences are the basis of this result. In Beijing, the group 'parents with adult children' performs more activities with members of the nuclear family, and the group 'extended households' is characterised by more activities with other family members. These findings correspond to how elderly parents live with their married children and grandchildren under the same roof.

We also analysed the impact of age on companionship, shown in Table 5. In general, in both metropolitan areas, young participants tend to meet friends more frequently compared with middle-aged or older participants. The differences between the young and other age categories are

Table 3. Frequency of companionship in places other than own homes in Beijing and Utrecht.

	Alone		Nuclear family		Other family		Friend		Colleague		Total	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
<i>Beijing</i>												
Other's home	2	0.4	43	7.8	55	37.9	14	7.4	5	4.4	119	8
Leisure facility	161	33.8	244	44.2	33	22.8	96	51.1	25	21.9	559	37.4
Restaurant	23	4.8	46	8.3	16	11	46	24.5	89	78.1	220	14.7
Service facility	69	14.5	24	4.3	11	7.6	8	4.3	6	5.3	118	7.9
Shop	221	46.4	195	35.3	30	20.7	24	12.8	9	7.9	479	32
Total	476	100	552	100	145	100	188	100	134	117.5	1495	100
<i>Utrecht</i>												
Other's home	20	3.3	174	35.2	104	71.2	141	36.8	28	45.2	467	27.6
Leisure facility	76	12.6	87	17.6	23	15.8	159	41.5	6	9.7	351	20.8
Restaurant	9	1.5	38	7.7	5	3.4	56	14.6	25	40.3	133	7.9
Service facility	49	8.1	12	2.4	2	1.4	6	1.6	0	0	69	4.1
Shop	450	74.5	183	37	12	8.2	21	5.5	3	4.8	669	39.6
- Grocery shop	292	48.3	76	15.4	1	0.7	8	2.1	2	3.2	379	22.4
- Other shop	158	26.2	107	21.7	11	7.5	13	3.4	1	1.6	290	17.2
Total	604	100	494	100	146	100	383	100	62	100	1689	100

Table 4. Frequency of companionship by household type in Beijing and Utrecht

Household type/ companion	Alone		Nuclear family		Other family		Friend		Colleague		Total abs.
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	
<i>Beijing</i>											
Single person	95	62.1	11	7.2	15	9.8	25	16.3	7	4.6	153
Couple	381	27.4	769	55.3	124	8.9	88	6.3	29	2.1	1391
Nuclear family	386	25.4	932	61.2	138	9.1	31	2	35	2.3	1522
Parents with adult children	608	35.8	884	52.1	98	5.8	68	4	39	2.3	1697
Extended family	242	28.1	294	34.2	278	32.3	20	2.3	26	3	860
Total	1712	30.4	2890	51.4	653	11.6	232	4.1	136	2.4	5623
<i>Utrecht</i>											
Single person	951	72.7	70	5.4	72	5.5	196	15	19	1.5	1308
Couple	994	38.3	1328	51.2	97	3.7	159	6.1	16	0.6	2594
Nuclear family	777	28.7	1668	61.7	79	2.9	156	5.8	23	0.9	2703
Other	147	42.9	108	31.5	9	2.6	73	21.3	6	1.7	343
Total	2869	41.3	3174	45.7	257	3.7	584	8.4	64	0.9	6948

Table 5. Frequency of companionship by age in Beijing and Utrecht.

Age	Alone		Nuclear family		Other family		Friend		Colleague		Total Abs. Freq.
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	
<i>Beijing</i>											
20–29	132	24.6	231	43.0	108	20.1	41	7.6	25	4.7	537
30–39	388	24.5	835	52.6	285	18.0	37	2.3	41	2.6	1586
40–49	458	32.6	735	52.4	137	9.8	37	2.6	36	2.6	1403
50–59	527	34.7	783	51.5	95	6.2	88	5.8	27	1.8	1520
60 +	207	35.9	306	53.0	28	4.9	29	5.0	7	1.2	577
<i>Utrecht</i>											
20–29	254	49.3	167	32.4	33	6.4	56	10.9	5	1.0	515
30–39	507	37.9	657	49.1	41	3.1	118	8.8	15	1.1	1338
40–49	739	36.9	1041	52.0	72	3.6	133	6.6	17	0.8	2002
50–59	966	44.9	886	41.2	75	3.5	206	9.6	18	0.8	2151
60 +	403	42.8	423	44.9	36	3.8	71	7.5	9	1.0	942

larger for Beijing than for Utrecht, which might indicate a behavioural and cultural transition for young Chinese people, who are more inclined to make their own friends. When people turn 50 and spend less time caring for their children, they are likely to increase the number of contacts with friends. Owing to the death of social network members, these contacts diminish in frequency again for those above the age of 60.

Multivariate analysis

We estimated separate multi-nominal logit models (MNL) for Beijing and Utrecht for the choice of companionship (Table 6) and the choice of meeting place (Table 7). The models in Table 5 are statistically significant. With respect to gender, in Beijing, men tend to participate in fewer activities with other family members and to engage in more

activities alone compared with women. In Utrecht, the same (non-significant) impact is shown for 'other family', but men participate in more activities with their partners and/or children. The reason for this difference might be the traditional gender norm in China whereby men dominate outside the home and women dominate inside it, as a consequence reducing men's contact with household members (Cao and Chai, 2007). In general, young people have fewer chores to do and thus more time to spend with others.

Household structure significantly influences the choice of companions in the two metropolitan areas. Participants in Utrecht perform more family activities after marriage or cohabitation and fewer activities with friends/colleagues compared with single people. A romantic relationship and/or the birth of a child could be the cause of the companionship change (Bidarta and Lavenu, 2004). However, in Beijing, partners in couples and members of extended families take part in more activities with other family members compared with single people. This finding appears to be associated with the strong belief in the importance of the family in China: adult children might get married before they are financially independent and co-reside with their older parents; when they live on their own, they often live nearby and frequently interact with other family members (Chen and Silverstein, 2000).

Income has a significant effect on the choice of companion only in Utrecht. With increasing income, more activities are performed with friends and members of the nuclear family and fewer with other family members. This finding might be the result of greater geographical distances between the residential homes of high-income households and other family members because of the more specialised jobs of high-income people who, in general, also have higher educational levels. This result might also demonstrate

greater social distances. It might be that high-income and more highly educated people have a more individualised, independent lifestyle in which there is less need to meet family members (Komter and Knijn, 2006).

On workdays, participants in Utrecht tend to perform fewer activities with other people. With the exception of friends/colleagues, workdays promote joint activities for this group for Beijing. This finding reflects the important role of colleagues in Chinese society. *Danwei* (the work unit) as the basic spatial unit led to people living and working together, which resulted in frequent contacts between colleagues after work (Wang et al., 2011). Although the last 30 years have seen many changes in the organisation of work, the collective behaviour pattern might have survived in daily life (Farquhar and Zhang, 2005; Wang et al., 2012). With respect to residential space in both metropolitan areas, high-density neighbourhoods encourage people to participate in activities with members of their nuclear family. In line with previous studies on residential segregation (Tomba, 2004; Wang et al., 2012), behavioural differences exist significantly among neighbourhoods both in Beijing and Utrecht.

As for activity space, in both metropolitan areas, members of nuclear families more often meet in the homes of others and less often in public places compared with people who are alone. In Beijing, the same is true for other family members. In Utrecht, these relatives and friends/colleagues also meet more often in public places than people who undertake activities alone. Although we know from Table 2 that friends/colleagues are less frequently visited at home in Beijing than in Utrecht, Table 6 shows almost no difference in the visited places in reference to people performing activities alone. The choice of activity place is analysed in Table 7.

Table 7 shows that in both metropolitan areas, men tend to perform fewer joint

Table 6. Multi-nominal logit models on companionship in Beijing and Utrecht.

Companion	Beijing	Nuclear family	Other family	Friend/ colleague	Utrecht	Nuclear family	Other family	Friend/ colleague
Gender	Female (ref)							
	Male	-0.1	-0.442***	0.286**		0.174***	-0.023	0.102
Age	20-29 (ref)							
	30-39	0.107	-0.205	-0.976***		0.125	-0.788***	-0.151
	40-49	-0.156	-0.575***	-1.116***		-0.087	-0.782***	-0.623***
	50-59	-0.233	-0.851***	-0.938***		-0.151	-0.958***	-0.242
	60 +	-0.193	-1.495***	-1.476***		0.055	-0.804***	-0.192
HH structure	Single person (ref)				Single person (ref)			
	Couple	3.068***	1.308***	-0.066	Couple	2.74***	-0.084	-0.558***
	Nuclear family	3.045***	0.904***	-0.644**	Nuclear	3.253***	0.02	-0.01
	Parents with adult children	2.755***	0.888***	-0.484	Other	2.356***	-0.495	0.947***
HH income	Extended family < 300 (ref)							
	300-500	2.441***	2.275***	-0.432	< 1000 (ref)			
	500-700	-0.068	-0.195	0.289	1000-2000	0.039	-1.478***	-0.989***
	700-1000	0.001	0.273*	0.651***	2000-3000	0.445**	-0.778**	-0.686***
	> 1000	0.222*	-0.22	0.084	3000-4000	0.369**	-0.751**	-0.664***
Education	Low (ref)				> 4000	0.419**	-1.012	-0.447*
	Middle	0.13	0.653***	-0.094		-0.489***	-0.851**	-0.068
	High	0.119	1.011***	-0.206		-0.576***	-1.149***	0.054
Workday	No (ref)							
	Yes	-0.512***	-0.448***	0.321**		-0.54***	-0.551***	-0.381***
Residential area	Pop. density	0.011***	-0.02***	-0.005		0.004	-0.143***	-0.003**
Activity place	Own home (ref)							
	Other's home	2.231***	4.31***	5.763***		2.08***	4.802***	4.571***
	Other place	-0.704***	-0.834***	2.954***		-0.982***	0.372**	1.691***
Constant		-2.111	-1.833	-2.447		-1.83	0.523	-1.015
		Number of obs. = 5623				Number of obs. = 6948		
		Pseudo R ² = 0.1442				Pseudo R ² = 0.1994		
		Log likelihood = -5450.3				Log likelihood = -5931.63		
		Prob. > chi ² = 0.0000				Prob. > chi ² = 0.0000		

Notes: *P <= 0.10; **P <= 0.05; ***P <= 0.001. Dependent variable is the nominal variable of companionship type with 'alone' as the reference category.

Table 7. Multi-nominal logit models on choice for meeting place in Beijing and Utrecht.

Place	Beijing	Others' home	Public place	Utrecht	Others' home	Public place
Gender	Female (ref)					
	Male	-0.206	-0.272***		-0.002	-0.251***
Age	20-29 (ref)					
	30-39	0.423	0.240*		0.598**	0.004
	40-49	0.4	0.201		0.571**	0.288*
	50-59	0.279	0.205		0.456**	0.126
	60 +	-0.842	0.450***		0.418	0.213
HH structure	Single person (ref)			Single person (ref)		
	Couple	-0.079	0.410*	Couple	-0.169	0.467***
	Nuclear family	-0.286	0.346	Nuclear family	-0.311	0.329***
	Parents with adult children	-0.349	0.254	Other	-0.476*	-0.028
	Extended family	-0.513	0.156			
HH income	< 300 (ref)			< 1000 (ref)		
	300-500	-0.327	-0.153	1000-2000	0.274	0.09
	500-700	-0.354	0.063	2000-3000	0.344	0.019
	700-1000	-0.045	0.055	3000-4000	0.241	-0.073
	> 1000	-0.573	0.039	> 4000	0.029	0.106
Education	Low (ref)					
	Middle	-0.646*	0.071		1.265**	0.217
	High	-0.572	0.078		1.427***	0.347
Workday	No					
	Yes	-2.032***	-0.641***		-0.483***	-0.4***
Residential area	Pop. density	0.033***	0.014***		0.055***	0.022**
Companion	Alone (ref)					
	Nuclear family	2.225***	-0.7***		2.092***	-0.874***
	Other family	4.273***	-0.8***		4.787***	0.381**
	Friend/colleague	5.751***	2.96***		4.575***	1.691***
Constant		-5.602	-1.338		-6.456	-1.758
	Number of obs. = 5623				Number of obs. = 6948	
	Pseudo R ² = 0.1473				Pseudo R ² = 0.1439	
	Log likelihood = -3130.7				Log likelihood = -4150.0	
	Prob. > chi ² = 0.0000				Prob. > chi ² = 0.0000	

Notes: * $P < 0.10$; ** $P < 0.05$; *** $P < 0.001$. Dependent variable is the nominal variable of meeting place type with 'own home' as the reference category.

activities in public places than in their own homes. Age has a distinct influence on the choice of meeting place. In Beijing, older participants are more inclined to visit public places compared with young people. As for companionship at home (Table 3), the younger generation in Beijing is more likely to receive friends at home, which might indicate that the meaning of home is changing in Chinese society (Cao, 2009). The differences between age categories in Utrecht are much smaller, although some are significant.

For household structure, couples in Beijing and couples and nuclear families in Utrecht tend to perform more activities in public urban spaces. This finding shows that married people or those with children might be encouraged or driven to use urban facilities.

In Beijing, the influence of income and education is not significant for the choice of activity place. In Utrecht, the same finding holds for income level but not for education level. More highly educated inhabitants are likely to visit the homes of others.

On workdays, people tend to undertake fewer activities in the homes of others and in public places. Because we paid attention to only leisure and recreational activities, the findings show that those who spend the most time at work conduct more non-work activities in their own homes.

There are both similarities and differences between Beijing and Utrecht regarding the impact that companionship has on the choice of an activity place. If members of a nuclear family participate in activities, they tend to do so in their own home or in the homes of others, and if friends or colleagues participate in activities, the activities are likely to take place in the homes of others and in public places rather than in their own homes. However, in Beijing, activities with other family members are likely to take place in the homes of others rather than in public places, whereas in Utrecht, activities

are likely to be conducted in the homes of others and public places equally often. These results are consistent with the discussion of the differences in the strength of the belief in the importance of the family in different cultural contexts.

Conclusion and discussion

This study sought to enhance our understanding of the meaning of cultural orientations for companionship and the choice of meeting places in urban China and the Netherlands. We formulated two hypotheses: (1) people in China will have more contacts with family members and fewer with friends compared with people in the Netherlands, and (2) Chinese urban inhabitants will meet their family members at home and their friends in public places, whereas the Dutch will not discriminate between home and public places when meeting friends and family.

The descriptive analysis suggests that cultural differences do have an effect. In Beijing, the majority of activities are undertaken with members of the nuclear family and with other family members; performing activities alone follows thereafter. The share of individual activities and activities performed with friends in Utrecht is much higher than in Beijing. These differences can be partly explained by differences in cultural orientation. The collectivistic cultural orientation with its strong focus on the family can explain the large share of joint family activities. The more individualistic orientation in Utrecht leads to the performance of more activities alone or with non-family members and within the family, preferably with partners and children. These findings are supported by an OECD report (2005) that shows that in the Netherlands, almost all people spend time with friends, colleagues and other social groups (not family). This finding is in strong contrast to, for

example, Japan (which, like China, has a more collectivistic orientation), where one-sixth of the population rarely or never spends time with non-family members.

Although in both metropolitan areas, three-quarters of all non-work activities take place at home, there are large differences in the use of the home. In Beijing, the home is the place where most nuclear family and other family joint activities are undertaken; these contacts also predominate at public leisure facilities. In Utrecht, the home is also a meeting place for friends, who dominate the contacts at public leisure facilities as well. The meaning of home in Beijing appears to coincide closely with Duyvendak's (2011) 'haven', which is a rather exclusive and private place for the people with whom one is most intimate, namely the family. The Chinese have a deep emotional attachment to the home, and companionship with family members reinforces this strong belief in the importance of the family (Su, 2014).

In Beijing, daily contacts with friends or colleagues occur in public places. It is also feasible that the housing situation is important. In the Netherlands, every household has the right and the financial means to rent or buy a place to live. This is not the case in China, however, because of the shortage and high cost of housing in large cities (Li, 2012). The lack of privacy at home forces people to leave the house for social contacts. However, within the home in Utrecht, it is often possible to withdraw with guests to a separate room to have a more private conversation. The public places in Utrecht are used as a 'heaven' (Duyvendak, 2011) to connect with friends. An interesting issue is how the social interactions between familiar people and strangers in public places in both metropolitan areas take place. It could be hypothesised that in a more individualist-oriented culture, there are more interactions between familiar and unfamiliar people than there are in a collectivist-oriented culture.

In spite of the 'cultural difference' and 'housing' hypotheses we have discussed in this paper, there might be other explanations for our findings. The first one is related to geographical distribution of social network members in combination with the quality of transportation. When the spatial distances, travel times and costs are large between friends there might be a bigger chance in Beijing in meeting these friends in public places 'in between' instead of at home. The relatively low travel costs by private car in the Netherlands could stimulate visits to each other homes. Also, the presence of gated communities in Beijing might reduce the opportunities to meet each other at home. However, the data sets we have used in this paper do not allow testing both hypotheses and as a consequence should be left for future research.

The modelling results show that cultural differences should be treated in a nuanced manner, as they work through certain socio-demographic variables. Women in Beijing dominate the home compared with women in Utrecht, which shows that the Confucian gender norm persists in today's China (Leung, 2010; Wellman and Wortley, 1990). Relatively large differences exist between age categories and stages in life: in general, young people and households without children have more contacts, and youngsters more often meet friends at home. These differences are much smaller in Utrecht than in Beijing, however, indicating differences in cultural orientation as well as housing situations.

More highly educated and high-income people in Utrecht have fewer contacts with other family members. A more individualistic cultural orientation can increase the social distances between family members and might relax the constraint on increasing geographical distances between residential locations. These causal relationships can be further examined in a future qualitative

study. The results for Beijing show that more highly educated people have more contacts with other family members compared with less educated people, probably owing to greater feelings of responsibility.

In this study we have applied two major cultural orientations – individualistic and collectivistic – derived from the seminal work of Hofstede (2001). Because there might exist large social and spatial differentiations in cultural orientations, it is advisable to further explore this variety. This observation also applies to the changes in cultural orientations caused by further globalisation and modernisation (or perhaps counter-modernisation). Economic developments in China, the increasing contact with Western cultures and women's emancipation are playing important roles in the development of more individualised cultural orientations in this country. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the Chinese government is stimulating the development of a 'harmonious society' that promotes communications between different groups (Chan, 2009). Such a policy direction might also be fruitful for the Netherlands. A study by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) shows that most Dutch people are worried about the deprivation of society, aggressiveness, the lack of solidarity, and declining values and norms. This finding points at a serious lack of community feeling, which the Netherlands wants to see restored (Schnabel and De Hart, 2008). The development of new relations and a sense of community might prevent excessive individualisation and minimise the experienced lack of social connectedness. Therefore, though this study provides the fact in 2007, we are aware of the importance of ongoing research to get a better understanding of the changes in social contacts due to cultural, economic, technological and spatial developments in society.

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Notes

1. The data were from the Sixth Population Census in 2010. The population in Beijing is 19.6 million, with 11% in two central districts and 48.7% in four expansion districts. The six districts comprise the built-up area along the Fifth Ring Road.

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