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Crisis and bias: Exploring ethnic prejudice among Chinese-Dutch children before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Interethnic prejudice in children has been studied mostly among White and Black populations in the United States, but less among East Asian populations and Europe. Given that interethnic prejudice is sensitive to populations and contexts, research on previously neglected groups is needed. In the current study, interethnic prejudice is examined among Chinese-Dutch children aged 7–11 years ($N = 80$, 42 girls and 38 boys), focusing on their preference for and rejection of East Asian, White, Southwest Asian and North African, and Black peers. In addition, interethnic prejudice is examined in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis that has led to anti-Asian racism. The results revealed that Chinese-Dutch children evaluated their ethnic ingroup and the White outgroup most positively, and the Black outgroup least positively. Moreover, stronger ingroup affinity (in terms of lower ingroup rejection) among Chinese-Dutch children was found during than before the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the importance of situational influences on children's interethnic prejudice.

KEYWORDS
Chinese, COVID-19, ethnic prejudice, preference, rejection

1 | INTRODUCTION

The childhood period is particularly relevant for studying interethnic prejudice, given meta-analytic evidence for significant developments in prejudice during the primary school years (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). However, interethnic prejudice has predominantly been studied among White and Black populations in the United States (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011), with less attention on Asian populations, or the European context. In addition, interethnic prejudice in relation to the East Asian diaspora is particularly relevant in the era of the COVID pandemic, given that the ensuing health and societal crises have brought greater prejudice and discrimination towards people with a Chinese background worldwide (Ittefaq et al., 2022). The pervasive anti-Chinese discrimination sparked anger among ethnic Chinese people (Li et al., 2021). Furthermore, the Chinese diaspora tended to strengthen ingroup identification (Lou et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022) or disidentify from the dominant group (Lou et al., 2021). The anger and (dis)identification can be viewed as a shift in their attitudes towards their heritage and national groups. The effect of the pandemic on ethnic prejudice has been studied among adults, but the effect may also be present among children. The current study is the first to explore children's ethnic prejudice in Chinese-Dutch families in relation to the COVID pandemic.

1.1 | Ethnic prejudice in children

Ethnic prejudice can be defined as a preconceived devaluation of persons based on their perceived belonging to a different group in terms of their racial, cultural or religious characteristics (Eagly & Diekman, 2005). Ingroup favouritism and outgroup rejection are forms of interethnic prejudice. Ingroup favouritism refers to more positive evaluations of and more favourable responses to members of one's own ethnic group than members of outgroups (Everett et al., 2015). Outgroup rejection refers to a more negative evaluation of members of an ethnic outgroup compared to ingroup members. Social Identity Theory (SIT) explains the development of ingroup favouritism and outgroup rejection. People tend to favour ingroup members and make biased intergroup comparisons, serving the basic human need of enhancing a positive self-image and self-esteem (Brown, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In addition, insights from System Justification Theory (SJT) explain more specifically why interethnic prejudice in underrepresented ethnic groups may differ from those in dominant ethnic groups. Ingroup favouritism is lower in stigmatized groups than in White dominant groups (Brown, 2010), as shown for example among Black children in the United States (3 and 5 years old, Kurtz-Costes et al., 2011) and among Black and South Asian children in the United Kingdom (7 years old, Leman & Lam, 2008; 5, 9 and 13 years old, Leman et al., 2013). Limited ingroup favouritism has also been found among Black Dutch and Turkish Dutch children compared to White Dutch children (6–10 years old, Pektas et al., 2022). This is thought to reflect internalized knowledge of the ethnic hierarchy, leading to limited ingroup favouritism and White (dominant) group favouritism (Brown, 2010). In other words, people from underrepresented or low-status groups seem to preserve and justify the social status quo and show high-status outgroup favouritism (Jost, 2019) and can even rationalize negative stereotypes about their own group (Jost & Banaji, 1994).

Social Identity Development Theory (SIDT; Nesdale, 2004) was developed as an extension of SIT to propose four sequential phases in which children develop ethnic prejudice (undifferentiated, ethnic awareness, ethnic preference and ethnic prejudice). Specifically, in the first undifferentiated phase (prior to 2–3 years old), racial cues are not yet described as salient for young children. Later on, the ethnic awareness phase emerges around age 3 years when children start to identify different ethnic groups and categorize people as belonging to a particular group. In the third phase (5–6 years old), children's ethnic self-categorization firstly activates a focus on their ingroup and accompanying ingroup preference, before it may eventually develop into outgroup rejection (at around 7 years old; ethnic prejudice phase). In contrast to these developmental patterns described based on SIDT, meta-analytic research shows that prejudice among children from underrepresented ethnic-racial groups (i.e., Black group) towards higher status

outgroups (i.e., White group) is neutral or positive in early and middle childhood (until 7 years), and negative at older ages (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). In addition, research on the development of prejudice from one underrepresented group towards other underrepresented groups is limited. Also, the research results in the latest study, including young children (6–10 years) in the Netherlands, are inconsistent based on the specific ethnic group children belong to and prejudice is measured against (Pektas et al., 2022). In other words, the ethnic prejudice of underrepresented ethnic children and its (potential) developmental patterns seems to be population dependent. The variance in prejudice development indicates the importance of social and environmental influences on children at this stage, especially when changing social circumstances, for example, COVID-19 and the following anti-Asian racism are particularly relevant to the Chinese underrepresented group.

1.2 | Natural experiment: COVID impact

Major social events, such as the COVID pandemic, can lead to large-scale developments in interethnic prejudice. After the COVID-19 outbreak, the virus was labelled as 'the Chinese virus' in public discourse worldwide. Consistent with the (emotional) responses to historical pandemic outbreaks (e.g., the bubonic plague, commonly referred to as the Black Death, and the 1918 influenza, commonly referred to as 'Spanish Flu'), the fear for the coronavirus contributed to greater prejudice, intolerance, and even xenophobia towards people with a Chinese background (Elias et al., 2021). Corresponding increases in discrimination experiences and ethnic identity were widely found among Chinese immigrant adults after the COVID outbreak (e.g., Ittefaq et al., 2022; Lou et al., 2021), and similar experiences were also reported in the Netherlands (Broekroelofs & Poerwoatmodjo, 2021). To be more specific, 314 COVID-19-related discrimination events were reported by people with an East Asian appearance, representing 12% of all racial discrimination incidents in the year 2020 in the Netherlands (Antidiscriminatievoorzieningen, 2021). A discriminatory song on a public radio show promoting the exclusion of Chinese immigrant people led to a petition 'We are not viruses!' signed more than 65,000 times (Antidiscriminatievoorzieningen, 2021).

Group identification can be strengthened through connectedness with other ingroup members, and people usually tend to obtain support from their own ethnic group when surrounded by more discriminatory attitudes (Syed et al., 2018; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014), leading to higher ingroup preference. It is unclear whether such patterns would also be found in children. According to the social-cognitive developmental approach to ethnic prejudice, children, with cognitive skills to categorize people in different ethnic groups, can be influenced by their immediate and broader social environment (e.g., family or peer conversations, media consumption; Levy & Hughes, 2009). In addition, the content of messages in their environment is influenced by world-changing events. It is therefore hypothesized that the COVID pandemic which is directly related to the Chinese ethnic group can impact Chinese-Dutch children's ethnic attitudes. Given that research among adults showed that both people of colour and White people acted out in hate crimes against Asian Americans (Wong, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022), we did not distinguish between specific outgroups but expect potentially more tense relations with all outgroups in this study.

The data collection of the present study on ethnic prejudice in Chinese-Dutch children took place from May 2019 to May 2021. The original project was not specifically designed to test the effect of the pandemic. However, COVID-19 broke out almost exactly in the middle of data collection. The change in external circumstances in the middle of the study contributed to a dataset with half of the data collected before and half during the pandemic, which meets the conditions of a natural experiment (Dunning, 2012). To the best of our knowledge, there were only two studies (Haft and Zhou, 2021; Yang et al., 2022) conducted on Chinese adult immigrants (college students in the United States and Chinese-Dutch female adults in the Netherlands) that collected data both before and during the pandemic, using a similar natural experimental design as the current study. This type of naturally split dataset presents a unique opportunity to accurately examine the potential impact of the pandemic on interethnic prejudice among *children* with a Chinese background.

1.3 | The dutch context

The Netherlands provides an interesting cultural context with increasing ethnic diversity to examine child interethnic prejudice (Ziller, 2015). Almost a quarter of the population in the Netherlands has a non-Dutch immigrant background (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022), among which people with a Southwest Asian and North African background (SWANA, specifically from Turkey and Morocco) form the largest underrepresented ethnic group (4.8% of the total Dutch population), followed by the Black underrepresented group with a Surinamese or Antillean background (3.0% of the total Dutch population, Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022). The Chinese underrepresented group (0.6% of the total Dutch population) is the largest East Asian community, and the seventh largest non-Western underrepresented group in the Netherlands after those with roots in Turkey, Morocco, Suriname, Indonesia, (former) Netherlands Antilles and Aruba and Syria (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022). In recent years, almost half of the immigrants in the Netherlands are from within Europe, followed by 18% of immigrants from Asia, mostly India and China (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2020).

Besides the fact that the Chinese underrepresented group endured a great deal of prejudice, and intolerance as a result of the COVID outbreak in China, the two largest underrepresented groups, that is, the SWANA and the Black underrepresented groups, have been consistently most prominent in societal debates about Dutch multicultural society. Specifically, the SWANA group (who mostly identify as Muslims) is frequently subjected to negative stereotypes, such as being viewed as backward or extremist, and faces discrimination in accessing education, employment and housing (e.g., Ramos et al., 2019; Siebers & Dennissen, 2015). There have been debates in Dutch society about the compatibility of Islam with Dutch values, which is also reflected in the consistent 10%–13% of the voting population supporting a political party with explicit anti-Islam attitudes (Kiesraad, 2012, 2017, 2021). Further, specifically relevant to the Black underrepresented group in the Netherlands, current societal debates center around the legacy of slavery and colonialism in today's society, and the need for apologies, reparations and better education regarding this history (e.g., van Huis, 2019).

Previous research including underrepresented ethnic groups in the Netherlands (i.e., Turkish-Dutch and Black Dutch children, aged 6–10 years) showed stronger prejudice towards the Black than the White outgroup in Turkish-Dutch children, but no within-group difference in Black Dutch children (de Bruijn et al., 2022). Another study indicated that Turkish-Dutch and Black Dutch children showed less clear preference for their own ethnic group compared to White outgroup preference. Both White and Turkish-Dutch children showed more rejection and less preference for the Black outgroup compared to Black Dutch children (aged 6–10 years, Pektas et al., 2022). Generally, outgroup prejudice differs for specific outgroups, likely depending on perceived social distance, ethnic hierarchy and religion. The White Dutch population was observed ranking at the top of the ethnic hierarchy in Dutch society by Dutch respondents, or immediately after the ingroup but before the other underrepresented ethnic groups among underrepresented ethnic respondents (including samples of Miscellaneous-, Moroccan-, Surinamese- and Turkish-Dutch, Verkuyten & Kinket, 2000, Verkuyten et al., 1996). Moreover, the White Dutch felt less distant than the other underrepresented ethnic populations by underrepresented ethnic samples (including Antillean-, Indonesian-, Moroccan-, Surinamese- and Turkish-Dutch, van Osch & Breugelmans, 2012; Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2016). Based on the ethnic hierarchy and social distance found in previous studies, ingroup and White outgroup might be more favoured (and less rejected) than the other underrepresented ethnic outgroups for children from an underrepresented ethnic group. However, the specific perception of the ethnic hierarchy and social distance with various underrepresented ethnic outgroups is unclear, and research focusing on a specific underrepresented ethnic group is therefore needed better to understand child interethnic prejudice in a European context. To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies that have examined prejudice in East Asian populations in Europe or the Netherlands. The current study aims to fill this gap.

1.4 | The present study

The present study examined Chinese-Dutch children's ethnic prejudice and uniquely tested potential differences by COVID-19 pandemic timing. Furthermore, the present study examined if the prejudice patterns of Chinese-Dutch children (7–11 years) are in line with SID and SJT, showing limited ingroup favouritism, White outgroup favouritism, and outgroup rejection. We tested and explored the following hypotheses and questions: (H1) the East Asian ingroup and White outgroup are preferred most and rejected least compared to the Black and SWANA ethnic outgroups. (H2) outgroup rejection and ingroup preference are higher post- than pre-COVID-19 outbreak, whereas outgroup preference and ingroup rejection are lower post- than pre-COVID-19 outbreak.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Sample

The present study is part of a larger project on the parenting origins of prejudice focusing on Chinese immigrant families in the Netherlands, in which Chinese(-Dutch) families ($N = 81$) participated. Families participating pre-COVID-19 ($n = 39$) were recruited through Chinese-related events (e.g., Chinese New Year's celebrations), charitable organizations (e.g., Chinese language schools), social media, researchers' networks and snowball sampling. Recruitment after the COVID-19 outbreak ($n = 42$) was done online through a recruitment video and digital leaflets shared on social media, pitch presentations during online child events and through the snowball procedure. Several criteria for the recruited families: (1) the mother, or at least one of her parents, was born in mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau or Taiwan (more than 95% of Taiwan's population is Han Chinese; Executive Yuan, 2016), (2) the biological father was either born in mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan or a North-Western European country, (3) participating parent(s) lived together with the child in the Netherlands during data collection, (4) the child was between 7 and 11 years old, (5) the child was either born in the Netherlands (63% of the children) or moved to the Netherlands (or a Dutch-speaking region in Belgium) at or before 6 years old, (6) the child attended a Dutch primary school and (7) the child and parents did not have severe development disorders or physical or mental illness. In addition, mothers and participating children were required to take part in the research and fathers' participation was optional. Siblings were not included in the research. The inclusion of parents in an interracial relationship was done to achieve a better representation of families with Chinese roots in the Netherlands, given that about a quarter of relationships in this population consist of a Chinese female and a North-Western European male partner (Gijsberts et al., 2011). Of the 81 recruited families, one child did not complete the relevant tasks, therefore leading to a total of 80 participating families for the current analyses.

Most of the mothers were born in mainland China (97%), while others were born in the Netherlands (1%), Taiwan (1%) and Thailand (1%). Similarly, most of the biological fathers were born in mainland China (63%), followed by the Netherlands (35%), Nigeria (1%) and Taiwan (1%). In the families in which mothers were living with a partner (95%), this partner was the biological father of the children in most cases ($n = 74$). In two families, the child had an ethnic Chinese biological father, but the mother had a current (White) Dutch partner. Related statistical analyses were performed twice, once coded for these two families as Chinese paternal ethnicity and once as White Dutch paternal ethnicity. The 80 participating children (53% female) aged between 7.40 and 11.99 years old ($M = 9.51$, $SD = 1.25$), and mothers aged between 32.31 and 50.70 years old ($M = 40.47$, $SD = 3.85$). In addition, most of the mothers were highly educated (bachelor's degree or higher; 94%) and worked (75% of the total group; 49% were employed and 26% were self-employed).

2.2 | Procedure

Two researchers visited the participating families (face to face before the first lockdown due to COVID-19 and online afterwards) for approximately 1.5–2 h, during which parent–child interactive tasks, child individual tasks (including the social preference task), standardized computerized tasks and parental questionnaires were conducted. The parent–child interactive and child individual tasks were videotaped for post hoc coding. All children received a small gift after the visit. Participating parents filled in an online questionnaire, after which each participating parent received a gift card of 20 euros as a reward for their participation. Besides sociodemographic data collected through the questionnaire, only a child's social preference task during the visit was included in the current study. The child social preference task in the physical (pre-COVID outbreak) or online visit (post-COVID outbreak) included no intensive interaction between children and researchers; instead it was about answering questions orally raised by the researcher based on the photos shown on an A4 paper or on the screen. The formulation of the questions was the same throughout the study. Therefore, the tasks conducted offline and online were regarded as identical assessments. All questionnaires for parents were available in both Chinese and Dutch, while the child tasks were always in Dutch because all children were enrolled in the Dutch educational system for at least several years. Consent forms were signed by both parents or one on behalf of both for their and their child's participation. The research design, study procedures and all the assignments were approved by an Ethics committee.

2.3 | Measures

2.3.1 | Child ethnic preference and rejection

Children completed a social preference task, adapted from the work by Levy et al. (2005), with 16 child photos printed on A4 paper: two boys and two girls for each ethnicity, that is, East Asian (children in the photos had Chinese background), White, Black and SWANA (children in the photos had a Turkish or Moroccan background). All the children in the photos wore a white T-shirt (headshot from the upper chest and up), looked forward, smiled and were portrayed with a white background colour. A pilot was done with 34 White Dutch, 23 Turkish-Dutch, 20 Black Dutch and 8 Chinese-Dutch adults aged 18–53 years ($N = 85$, $M = 27.51$, $SD = 6.93$, 63% female). Results showed that East Asian and White children in the photos were consistently classified as Chinese (99%–100%), and as Dutch (99%–100%), the Black children were dominantly classified as Surinamese or Caribbean (93%–99%) and the children of SWANA descent were also consistently classified as Turkish or Moroccan (88%–98%).

In addition, the participants in the pilot study were also asked to rate the attractiveness and cuteness of each child on a 0-to-10 rating scale, with a higher score reflecting more attractive or cute. The results indicated that there were significant differences in both attractiveness and cuteness scores. Specifically, the White children ($M = 6.32$, $SD = 1.50$), the Black children ($M = 6.28$, $SD = 1.48$), and the SWANA children ($M = 6.12$, $SD = 1.68$) were rated more attractive than the East Asian children ($M = 5.70$, $SD = 1.87$, $t(81) = 5.72$, $p < 0.001$, $t(81) = 4.91$, $p < 0.001$, $t(80) = 3.96$, $p < 0.001$). The White children ($M = 6.32$, $SD = 1.50$) were also rated more attractive than the SWANA children ($M = 6.12$, $SD = 1.68$, $t(80) = 1.99$, $p = 0.050$) in the photos. Different patterns were shown in cuteness scores, that is, the East Asian children ($M = 6.40$, $SD = 1.66$) more cute than the Black children ($M = 6.02$, $SD = 1.61$, $t(80) = 2.82$, $p = 0.006$), and the SWANA children ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 1.68$, $t(80) = 5.15$, $p < 0.001$); the White children ($M = 6.20$, $SD = 1.48$) more cute than the SWANA children ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 1.68$, $t(81) = 4.16$, $p < 0.001$).

In the main study, 16 photos were presented to the participating children simultaneously, and five questions were asked as follows: (1) Who would you like to sit next to if you were in class with these children? (2) Who would you not like to sit next to if you were in class with these children? (3) Who would you like to invite to play at your home? (4) Who would you not like to invite to play at your home? and (5) Who would you like to invite to your birthday party? The participating children could select one photo for the first four questions, and one or multiple photos

for the last question. Selecting nobody for any questions was always allowed. Note that preference for one of the photos (the one picked) does not necessarily mean rejection for all the other photos that are not chosen. Thus, a parallel 'rejection' item was needed for these questions. For the question about the invitation to their birthday party, participating children could select as many children as they wanted. This means that photos that were not selected were automatically those that the children did not want to invite to their birthday party (i.e., the answer to the negative question). It was therefore not necessary to ask the question in a negative way again. Preference scores reflect the frequency of selecting children of a specific ethnicity in question (1), (3) and ([5]; range 0–6). Rejection scores reflect the frequency of selecting children of a specific ethnicity in question (2) and ([4]; range 0–2).

2.3.2 | Sociodemographic variables

Parents reported their sociodemographic characteristics in the screening and questionnaire during the home visit. Child gender was dichotomized as (0) male and (1) female, child birth country as (0) in the Netherlands and (1) other countries. Maternal living status was categorized as (0) living without or (1) with a partner, maternal educational level as lower (0) or (1) higher level (bachelor degree or higher). The ethnicity of the (biological) father of the child was categorized as (0) North-Western European or (1) ethnic Chinese.

2.4 | Analyses

The main variables were examined for outliers (i.e., 3.29 SD below or above the mean, Field, 2005). Two outliers on child White rejection and two outliers on child East Asian rejection were found and winsorized (i.e., brought the outlier closer to the other values of the set), after which all the main variables were normally distributed (i.e., standardized skewness <3) and no more outliers were found. No multivariate outliers were found.

Preliminary analyses to examine potential covariates for H2 (differences in ingroup and outgroup preference and rejection by COVID-19 timing) in sociodemographic pre- and post-COVID-outbreak group differences included independent t-tests (for continuous variables) and Pearson Chi-Square tests (for categorical variables). Of the Pearson Chi-Square tests, Fisher's Exact tests were used when the expected count was below five in more than 20% of the cells. The main analyses included repeated measures ANOVAs to compare child preference and rejection scores towards four ethnic groups (H1). One-way ANCOVA were run to examine child ethnic preference and rejection difference by COVID-19 timing while controlling covariates based on pre- and during-COVID-19 group differences in sociodemographic statistics (H2). To address the main hypotheses in the current study, power analyses with G*power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007) were conducted. Assuming a power of 80% and an alpha of 0.05, a sample size of 80 participants could detect a medium to large effect size for repeated-measures ANOVA (e.g., $f = 0.15$) and for ANCOVA (e.g., $f = 0.35$). The sample size lacked statistical power to detect small effect sizes.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Preliminary analyses

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the main variables. Seven out of 80 children opted not to choose a target for any of the preference questions, while 18 out of 80 children opted not to choose a target for any of the rejection questions. Three out of 80 children opted not to choose a target for any of the five questions on the main variables, that is, preference and rejection of any target groups. Further, sociodemographic group differences by context, that is, before and after the COVID-19 outbreak, were examined. There was a significant difference in maternal age

TABLE 1 Descriptives of main variables for the full sample (N = 80).

Variables		
Child East Asian preference (0–6)	M (SD)	2.12 (1.75)
Child White preference (0–6)	M (SD)	2.06 (1.53)
Child SWANA preference (0–6)	M (SD)	1.09 (1.36)
Child Black preference (0–6)	M (SD)	0.64 (1.19)
Child East Asian rejection (0–2)	M (SD)	0.14 (0.35)
Child White rejection (0–2)	M (SD)	0.12 (0.33)
Child SWANA rejection (0–2)	M (SD)	0.34 (0.59)
Child Black rejection (0–2)	M (SD)	0.71 (0.80)
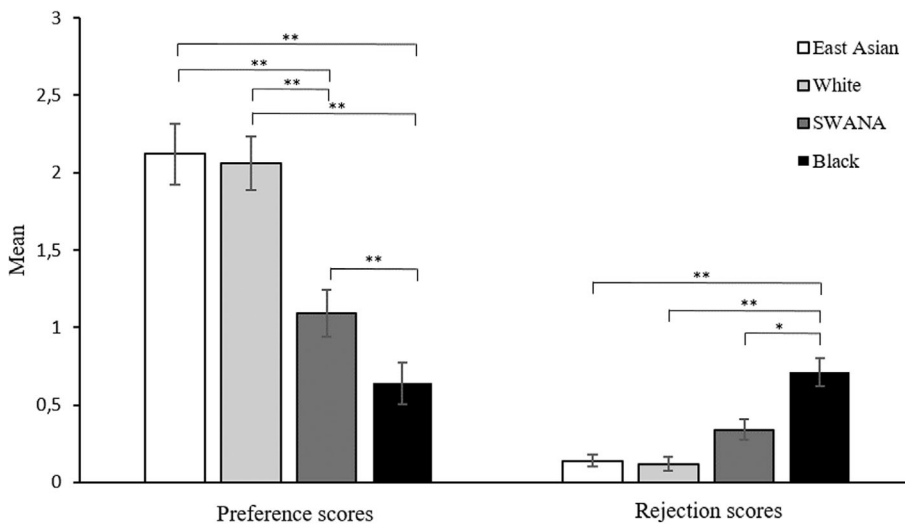
FIGURE 1 Comparison of child ethnic preference and rejection scores. Preference scores could range 0–6, rejection scores could range 0–2. See Table 1 for exact scores. *p < 0.05. **p < 0.01.

before (M = 41.44, SD = 4.01) and after the COVID outbreak (M = 39.55, SD = 3.49, t(78) = 2.25, p = 0.027), so that this variable was added as a covariate in the analyses testing H2 about child ethnic preference and rejection in relation to COVID-19 timing. No other significant differences were found in sociodemographic characteristics in pre- and post-COVID-outbreak groups.

3.2 | Main analyses

3.2.1 | Child ethnic preference and rejection (H1)

Figure 1 presents within-group differences in child preference and rejection scores towards four ethnic groups. Using a repeated-measures ANOVA with child ethnic preference scores, Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated (χ^2[5] = 46.99, p < 0.001) so that the degrees of freedom were corrected using Greenhouse–Geisser estimates of sphericity (ϵ = 0.73). The results indicated that ethnic preference scores differed

significantly within the Chinese-Dutch children ($F[2.20, 173.76] = 33.64$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p = 0.30$). Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons showed that child East Asian preference, White preference and SWANA preference scores were all significantly higher than Black preference scores ($p < 0.001$; $p < 0.001$; $p = 0.001$). In addition, child East Asian preference and White preference were both significantly higher than SWANA preference scores ($ps < 0.001$). There was no significant difference between East Asian and White preference scores.

A repeated-measures ANOVA was performed with child ethnic rejection scores towards four ethnic groups. Mauchly's test was again significant ($\chi^2[5] = 48.37$, $p < 0.001$), and Greenhouse–Geisser estimates of sphericity ($\epsilon = 0.72$) were therefore used to correct the degrees of freedom. There was an overall significant difference in Chinese-Dutch child ethnic rejection scores ($F[2.16, 170.29] = 17.22$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p = 0.18$). Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons indicated that child East Asian rejection, White rejection and SWANA rejection scores were significantly lower than Black rejection scores ($p < 0.001$; $p < 0.001$; $p = 0.020$). There was a trend towards significance showing lower White rejection than SWANA rejection scores ($p = 0.052$). No other significant differences were found between rejection scores.

3.2.2 | Child ethnic preference and rejection difference by COVID-19 timing (H2)

We examined potential differences in ethnic preference and rejection scores of children participating before and after the COVID-19 outbreak while controlling for maternal age (see Table 2). East Asian rejection scores in children participating during COVID-19 were significantly lower than that in children participating before COVID-19 ($F[1, 77] = 5.57$, $p = 0.021$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$). The covariate maternal age was not significantly related to East Asian rejection scores ($F[1, 77] = 0.02$, $p = 0.904$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$). No other significant differences in ethnic preference or rejection scores by COVID-19 timing were found.

4 | DISCUSSION

The present study examined levels of preference and rejection in Chinese-Dutch children regarding the ethnic ingroup (i.e., East Asian underrepresented group) and three outgroups (i.e., White dominant group, Black underrepresented group and SWANA underrepresented group), and their association with COVID-19 timing. Results showed that the Chinese-Dutch children showed a higher preference for their own ethnic group and the White outgroup, than for the other underrepresented ethnic outgroups (SWANA and Black groups). Rejection was higher towards the Black group than towards other groups. Furthermore, ingroup rejection in Chinese-Dutch children was lower after than before the COVID-19 outbreak.

The findings of higher preference for and lower rejection of the East Asian group (ingroup favouritism) than for the other underrepresented groups among Chinese-Dutch children are consistent with our expectation based on the SIT

TABLE 2 Difference in child ethnic preference and rejection before and after the COVID-19 outbreak.

Variables	Before COVID (N = 39)	During COVID (N = 41)	Df	MS	F	p	ηp^2
East Asian preference	1.87 (1.69)	2.37 (1.79)	1	4.45	1.45	0.232	0.019
White preference	2.23 (1.56)	1.90 (1.50)	1	1.77	0.75	0.390	0.010
SWANA preference	1.23 (1.55)	0.95 (1.16)	1	1.41	0.75	0.390	0.010
Black preference	0.82 (1.34)	0.46 (1.03)	1	2.93	2.06	0.156	0.026
East Asian rejection	0.23 (0.43)	0.05 (0.22)	1	0.64	5.57	0.021	0.067
White rejection	0.08 (0.27)	0.17 (0.38)	1	0.16	1.46	0.231	0.019
SWANA rejection	0.33 (0.58)	0.34 (0.62)	1	0.01	0.02	0.894	0.000
Black rejection	0.59 (0.72)	0.83 (0.86)	1	0.51	0.83	0.365	0.011

premise that favouring one's own (ethnic) group fulfils the basic human need for positive self-image and self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These results also confirmed that ingroup favouritism is present in early to middle childhood (i.e., between 7 and 11 years old; Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). In addition, higher preference and lower rejection by Chinese-Dutch children in relation to the White outgroup than to the other underrepresented groups are in line with expectations about dominant group favouritism, described as White favouritism in SJT (Brown, 2010). This means that children show awareness and justification of the social status quo where the White dominant group is better off and more respected than other groups in society (Nesdale & Flesser, 2001; Olson et al., 2012). Additionally, no differences were found between preference for their own ethnic group and preference for the White outgroup in the Chinese-Dutch children. This result is consistent with previous studies showing that ingroup favouritism is less strong in underrepresented ethnic groups, that is, limited ingroup favouritism, in comparison to their preference for the White dominant outgroup (Jensen & Tisak, 2020; Kurtz-Costes et al., 2011; Pektas et al., 2022).

Compared to the East Asian ingroup and the White dominant outgroup, SWANA and Black underrepresented groups were less preferred, and the Black group was rejected more than all other groups by the Chinese-Dutch children. We did not expect ethnic prejudice differences between the two underrepresented ethnic outgroups; however, the result implies that particularly Black children are at risk of being excluded by Chinese-Dutch children. These results are consistent with previous research showing that White and Turkish-Dutch children (6–10 years old) show more rejection and less preference towards the Black outgroup compared to White and SWANA groups (Pektas et al., 2022). This may be explained by the continuous societal debate in the past few years in the Netherlands about the figure of Black Pete (portrayed by White people in blackface) in a national children's festival (Sinterklaas; Lemmens, 2017), which was also covered by the national news broadcast specifically aimed at children (NOS Jeugdjournaal, 2019) and often watched by children in schools. A majority of the White Dutch population disagreed with the assertation of the protesters that Black Pete is racist and a colonial reenactment, and these discussions have led to more anti-Black racism in public debates (D'hondt, 2020; Polkamp, 2020). This continuous societal debate may have influenced the evaluations of the Black outgroup among all children living in the Netherlands, including Chinese-Dutch children. In addition, the results of ethnic preference and rejection among Chinese-Dutch children are consistent with the ethnic hierarchy in the Netherlands observed by underrepresented ethnic groups, that is, other underrepresented ethnic groups are ranked after the ingroup and the White Dutch population (Verkuyten et al., 1996). These patterns can also be explained by a less perceived social distance with the White Dutch outgroup than the other underrepresented ethnic outgroups found in Indonesian-, Moroccan-, Surinamese- and Turkish-Dutch groups (van Osch & Breugelmans, 2012; Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2016) and these observations can be applied to the Chinese-Dutch children.

Lower East Asian (i.e., ingroup) rejection was found after the COVID-19 outbreak among Chinese-Dutch children than before, confirming the hypothesis that Chinese-Dutch children had less negative attitudes towards the children of their ethnic group post-COVID outbreak. More discrimination experiences during the pandemic were found among the Chinese adult diaspora, followed by stronger group identification and more negative attitudes towards outgroups (Li et al., 2021; Lou et al., 2021). A similar pattern was identified in the current study for children with a Chinese background in the Netherlands, but only in the form of less negative ingroup attitudes. Based on the rejection-identification model (Branscombe et al., 1999), underrepresented ethnic groups cope with the pain of prejudice and discrimination by increasing identification with their own group. This can be reflected in, for example, more positive and less negative attitudes towards one's own ethnic group. The present findings only showed less negative attitudes towards the East Asian group among Chinese-Dutch children after the COVID outbreak, but not more positive ingroup attitudes (although the pattern was in the expected direction). It may be that the focus in Chinese-Dutch families has been on condemning discrimination against East Asians after the COVID outbreak, translating into less negative attitudes towards East Asians because Chinese-Dutch children were aware of and condemned negative attitudes that were present in society.

Contrary to our expectations, no differences were found in outgroup attitudes before and after the COVID outbreak among Chinese-Dutch children. However, our sample size was not large enough to detect differences in terms of outgroup preference and rejection with smaller effect sizes. Studies with larger samples are needed to test where there is a smaller or no effect. It is also possible that we found no effect on outgroup attitudes because the

public discourse focused on China and East Asian people specifically, which was reflected in a difference in East Asian ingroup attitudes before and during the pandemic. To summarize, the impact of a social context with greater intolerance towards the underrepresented Chinese group during the pandemic can be seen in child prejudice levels (lower ingroup rejection). In fact, the outbreak of COVID-19 followed by anti-Asian hate crimes, but also for example the murder of George Floyd followed by a surge in the visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement, can be regarded as major ethnicity-related social events that may affect adults and children's ingroup and outgroup feelings. Therefore, we advise researchers to be mindful of worldwide (as well as regional) developments in intergroup relations, attitudes and cultural diversity in the current rapidly changing social world.

There are some limitations to the present study. Firstly, the sample size in the present study is relatively small, which may have hampered the finding of significant results for a small effect size. Secondly, the non-probability sampling employed limits the generalizability of our results. Specifically, 94% of the mothers were highly educated, and education is positively correlated with awareness of discrimination against minorities (Wodtke, 2012). Therefore, well-educated mothers might have been more likely to reflect on their unpleasant intergroup relations at home, which can potentially have affected their children's interethnic attitudes. However, the Chinese diaspora's struggles with discrimination or being 'othered' due to the COVID-19 have been found in different European countries (e.g., France, the United Kingdom; Al-Talib et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021). Similarly, Chinese American adolescents (10–18 years old) experienced direct and varied discrimination and were therefore negatively affected in terms of anxiety (Zong et al., 2022). The results of interethnic attitude differences in Chinese-Dutch children before and after the COVID-19 outbreak in this study might also be applicable to children with a Chinese background elsewhere, or even relevant to other East Asians seen as Chinese by the White dominant group. Thirdly, online and offline assessment methods were regarded as identical assessments due to the use of the same question formulation, task regulations and limited interaction between researchers and children. Although research has shown that online methods (e.g., questionnaires) can be used as a suitable alternative to more traditional paper-based methods in psychological research (Riva et al., 2003), the potential difference between online and offline data collection with the child question-and-answer observation task should be acknowledged. More studies are needed to test for differences in online versus offline assessments with diverse research methods (e.g., observation, focus group) with participants of different ages. Last but not least, the pilot study indicated some differences in attractiveness and cuteness of the children in the photos. Attractiveness and cuteness were measured in a pilot study in a separate sample to describe the public attitudes towards the child photos in terms of their appearance, with the aim of selecting the photos that match attractiveness and cuteness across groups as much as possible. This was done according to criteria of universal attractiveness across groups, including averageness, symmetry and positive facial expressions (i.e., smiling, Ibáñez-Berganza et al., 2019; Kościński, 2007). However, attractiveness and cuteness cannot be completely distinguished from skin colour or other ethnic facial features (e.g., eye shape, Ibáñez-Berganza et al., 2019). Therefore, future research is needed to collect data on perceived attractiveness and cuteness as seen by the research participants and to examine the association between perceived attractiveness and cuteness by children and their ethnic attitudes.

This study not only sheds light on the development of interethnic prejudice among the underrepresented Chinese group that has long been overlooked in research but also uses a natural experimental research design to discover the most recent development of ethnic prejudice among this group of children. Limited ingroup preference, strong White outgroup preference and higher rejection towards the Black group were found. In addition, stronger ingroup affinity (in terms of lower ingroup rejection) was found after than before the COVID-19 outbreak. The findings emphasize the importance of taking wider societal developments that impact specific ethnic groups in different ways (such as the COVID pandemic) into account when studying child interethnic relations.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Yiran Yang: Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; funding acquisition; methodology; project administration; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Rosanneke A. G. Emmen:** Conceptualization; project administration; writing – review and editing. **Ymke de Bruijn:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing. **Judi Mesman:** Conceptualization; funding acquisition; project administration; writing – review and editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1002/icd.2462.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in DANS at https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-xaa-8m5u

ETHICS STATEMENT

This project has been approved by the FGGA Ethics Committee at Leiden University (2019-003-LUC-Yang).

INFORMED CONSENT

Consent forms were signed by both parents or one on behalf of both for their and their child's participation.

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