

The intercultural adaptations of Chinese students in a Thai international university

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the difficulties Chinese students encounter in various dimensions of intercultural adaptation. With a qualitative and quantitative study, six participants of freshman to master's students have been interviewed with semi-structured guides, and 56 Chinese students have been asked to complete a questionnaire. Observation of participants had been carried out from 4 months to 2 years. The results demonstrate the seven facets of culture in the university field: Thai university studying culture; Thai administrative culture; Thai interpersonal culture; Thai social culture; Thai eating habits; Thai daily habits; and nonverbal communication. The results and conclusions will be used to compile an intercultural manual for Chinese students who want to study in Thailand, which will also be of help for Thai universities to enhance their studying prerequisites for Chinese students.

Keywords: Intercultural adaptation, Chinese students, Thai culture, nonverbal communication

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1. Introduction

The process of intercultural adaptation is the main focus of scholars in the anthropology, psychology, communication and sociology disciplines. Studies of foreign students involved in the adaptation process mainly within a host culture are documented [1]. The intercultural adaptation of students studying in a foreign country seems to be an unavoidable process. ASEAN students studying in China have difficulties in adapting to Chinese culture due to narrow interpersonal circle, channels, and the influence of new media [2].

Studying at a university overseas is becoming popular for Chinese high school graduates and where Thailand, with its significance in ASEAN and the Belt and Road, is an advantageous option for their future career. It should be noted that Thai university enrolment has declined since 2011 due to the low birth rate and such a growing Chinese student market has filled a hole in Thai tertiary enrolment. This study, therefore, focuses on Chinese students in a Thai international university, and the difficulties they encountered during intercultural adaptation which also includes nonverbal aspects of communication.

Byram [3] explained culture as rules of behaviors, values, and beliefs. He says the “culture shock” we have in a different country is out of deeper social and

unconscious rules, but which are considered important in a social group context. The so-called “culture shock” is a medical metaphor suggested first by Oberg [4]. However, this dramatic change falling from high excitement to gross anxiety and with recovery and growth is not experienced by everyone.

As far as previous Thai studies are concerned, the findings seem to be positive from the psychological viewpoint [5–7]. Stated that the factors to influence mental health and cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students are levels of educational degrees and length of stay in Thailand. Sun, Yossuck, Panyadee, and Ek-llem [8] found Chinese students of the northern Thai universities less adapted to the environment.

Schumann's [9] acculturation model claims that social and psychological distance has a greater contribution to second language acquisition. As far as intercultural adaptation in Thai culture is concerned, language is the key factor [10],[11]. Nomnian [12] discovered that Thai teachers' accent of English and Thai language also interferes with the learning progress.

The difficulties faced by Chinese students with intercultural adaptation seem varied in the available literature (academically, socially, and environmentally). Most related studies about Chinese university students in Thailand are quantitative. Thus the objectives of this research are to explore and analyze the dynamic insights in the international universities. The conceptual framework derives from intercultural adaptation, cultural dimensions, and nonverbal communication.

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2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The Chinese students participating in this study were from freshman to master level studying at an international university in Thailand. All the undergraduate participants were chosen from Chinese elective classes. Six took the qualitative semi-structured interviews, 56 (including two interviewed) took the quantitative questionnaire.

In addition, there were 56 effective questionnaires (from free elective Chinese basic courses), excluding those from Taiwan and Malaysia. 52% were males, and 48% were females. Students' national origins covered almost all of China except the Northwest region. From freshman to junior, about 64% were business majors. Nearly half of all students applied through study agents. Their result can be complementary to the interview.

2.2 Measures and procedures

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used to explore varied aspects and nonverbal communication of intercultural adaptation of Chinese students. The interview guide referred to the researcher's study of Chinese teachers [13]. The interview consisted of two parts. The first part was related to the six different aspects of Thai culture, including Thai university learning culture, Thai university administrative culture, Thai interpersonal culture, Thai social culture, Thai daily habits, and Thai eating habits. Within each aspect, there were four questions. The second part of the interview had 11 aspects that dealt with nonverbal communication.

For the quantitative questionnaire, the interview guide was used as a reference to design an open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of personal information and 10 questions which included the method for applying to the university; their reason for choosing to study in Thailand and at which particular international university; the most adapted/unadapted culture in Thailand and in the international university, etc.

Observation of student adaptation was carried inside the classroom and on campus. The problems of Chinese students encountered in the university dormitory were also investigated.

2.3 Data analysis

The transcripts of the qualitative interviews were classified. The reading of key responses was carefully underlined. Then themes were located and compared with the reviewed literature. The results of the questionnaire were presented as complement data.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Difficulties found in Thai university culture

The difficulties were shown in Table 1.

3.2 Unfamiliar Thai nonverbal communication

Nonverbal facets are investigated, such as chronemics, haptics, kinesics, proxemics, and vocalics. Chinese students found it difficult to adapt to Thai students taking off their shoes and sitting cross-legged even while eating. The least adapted is to take off one's shoes and sit on the floor. Older teachers are more concerned about etiquette, like using both hands for receiving anything from the teacher. As an example, students hugging teachers would never happen in China, or when Chinese speak loudly compared to the Thai students who in general speak with a quiet voice. Only 33% of participants who could tell the difference tried to lower their voice in public. Punctuality is also a problem, not only for Thai students but also for Thai teachers. They are often 10 to 20 minutes late. Low work efficiency was taken as a sign of low progress in Thai society. Male students are more similar to being female in characters with some actions.

3.3 Summary of questionnaire

According to the result, the top three reasons for choosing to study in Thai universities were: 21% favor of Thailand; 14% close to hometown; and another 14% with family working in Thailand. The most un-adapted metrics to Thailand were weather at 34%, food at 32%, and language at 16%.

The most un-adapted with Thai people were language at 46%, no un-adapted at 18%, and low efficiency at 7%. The most un-adapted to the international university where this study was made were: no un-adapted at 25%; language at 18%; and course at 11%.

Thai food and weather are complicated for adaptation since they are the most adapted with 30% of Thai food and 27% of Thai weather. Language was the third factor with adaption problems giving a 16% measure. However, language was the second factor in the Thai international university adaptation (18%), while 46% of those questioned getting along well with Thai people.

3.4 Through observation

Chinese students in Thailand tend to study business for their future careers, so English is quite important when studying at an international university. However, lacking a good learning foundation or attitude, some need to reenter, and overall the student dropout rate is high. As a result, more students now enter or have changed to Communication Arts majors. Those who cannot pass business or English classes transfer to other universities, and even to certain universities that take only Chinese students and teach in Chinese.

Chinese students majoring in Chinese or studying elective Chinese basic courses are required to do the same homework as Thai students. Their Thai or Chinese teachers only passively ask them not to disturb the class. Some Chinese students who take Chinese

Table 1. Summary of difficulties in Thai university culture.

Six Facets	Extract (S refers to the interviewee)
1. Learning culture:	
Expectation to university teachers	S5: There is a tutor in China who is with you all the time, very close to you, inform you and guide you.
Accent of Thai teachers	S1: Teacher's pronunciation has a strong accent, so I can't understand quite so often.
Group work	S5: Here emphasize group study, doing many reports. There will be Thai people, many Thai people actually do not like to be (working) with foreigners.
English proficiency	S4: Not good at English and couldn't work together for reports, so Thai classmates discussed by themselves, which was embarrassing.
Obtain information	S5: We have a kind of feeling that we never know where to get information. Later, I paid attention to FB, IG and Line, but the new students won't pay attention.
Western business text books	S5: I learned cultural differences to a large extent. Doing business in China will not pay special attention to cultural differences. China just uses dumping. Regardless of your culture, cheap price is the last word.
2. Administrative culture:	
Communication with dorm and registration staff	S6: The dormitory staff cannot communicate in English.
Efficiency	S5: Registration staff's attitude has always been criticized. They may not like Chinese students. Generally, Chinese freshmen have poor English. They find it difficult to communicate in simple English, so they feel a little irritable.
Admission procedure	S4: They think it may be polite to be slow. This makes me unadapted S2: There are no admissions notices. No one explains and shows you how to do it.
3. Interpersonal culture:	
Distant with Thai students	S3: Thai seem friendly, but deeply exclusive. Never invite us to go out on weekends, which is understandable. It is difficult to communicate deeply since the culture and language are not the same.
Complicated with Chinese fellows	S1: Southerners don't get along quite well with northerners, and their personalities are quite different.
4. Social culture:	
Royal taboo	S1: I think it should be more democratic. Having free speech is better. I prefer places where there is freedom of speech.
Alcohol sale	S4: I can only buy wine after 5 o'clock? I think this is not convenient. Is it because of Buddhism?
Cards playing	S4: For playing cards, they don't like gambling. After all, playing cards in China is very common.
Gender	S1: I don't discriminate against them, but I don't like them personally. I have seen and met, but personally don't like transgender people very much, LADY BOY, etc.
Unreasonable charge	S1: When traveling, we, Chinese, would be charged more, like taking a taxi, and be asked for a lot of money. Since I don't speak Thai, I am treated here as a tourist.
5. Daily habits:	
Heat	S6: It was too hot at first.
Shoes removing	S1: I don't know the taboos for head and feet, but they love to take off their shoes. When they go to eat, they take off their shoes and put them up. I don't quite understand it. I think it is Thai culture.
Toilet hose	S5: Mentioning the hose next to the toilet, my mother told me that it was not clean, and it was not clean to hold with hands.
6. Eating habits:	
Flavor, herbs	S4: I'm not used to Thai food until now. The spices are a bit strange. Not very comfortable with spicy and sour.
Breakfast, rice amount	S6: I can't eat rice in the morning. The rice was relatively small for me at first.
Cold drinks	S5: When I went back after half a year as a freshman, I accidentally said that I didn't drink hot water. My family thought it was so miserable.

Table 2. Summary of observation

Positive	Negative
+ Help from the Chinese student community + Clear dorm rules and regulations	- Poor learning foundation or attitude - High loss rate - Mismatched nonverbal performance, habits

elective courses to boost their GPA do not take the class seriously. About 25% get below A-, while some have attendance problems. They do not take attendance seriously, and they might use leave to go to immigration or pretend to be sick as an excuse. Some leave the class early without telling the teacher. A few students doubt their Thai teacher's Chinese proficiency and argue to annoy the teacher.

At this international university, the numbers of Chinese students were, at one time, the most in Thailand and used study agents in China to help enlist students who wish to come to study in Thailand. The university is famous for its Business School. Chinese students need to make an effort to pass business and English courses. All participants said many of their friends simply disappeared during their studies. Many went back to China or transferred to universities that are easier to graduate from.

For nonverbal communication, Chinese students tend to lack gentle eye contact, compared to Thai students, which seems to instill a lack of trust or doubt. In addition, they lack gentle action, such as closing the door, so the van driver needs to remind them to close the door gently. While waiting for the tram or van in the university, they might rush to the fore, speak loudly in the van or talk loudly on their cell phone without an awareness of disturbing others. Although all participants like the uniform of Thai universities, they do not have the habit of ironing their shirts, so often it is wrinkled and unkempt. They seem unaware of the smell of their clothes and personal hygiene. In the early morning, some male students have messy or greasy hair as they do not shower as often as Thai students, so ingrained because of the weather. In the sports field, male Chinese students might take off their shirts and play as "skins" with the upper torso naked which is unusual in Thailand but common in China.

3.5 Discussion

3.5.1 Relationship with teachers under power distance

From the power distance detailed by Hofstede, the higher score represents a higher power distance environment. For example, China has a score of 80 compared to 64 for Thailand. Although Thailand has a lower score, the power distance seems greater than China in many ways.

In class, Thai students will seldom disagree with teachers regardless of what is said or taught and regardless of agreeing or not with what is taught. Teachers' authority is above students, so whenever their au-

thority is questioned, teachers will not tolerate such students. As an example in a Chinese class with a Thai teacher and native Chinese students, the Thai teacher would transfer out a Chinese student for arguing possible correct answers with an impolite attitude, and in so doing, challenged her Chinese proficiency.

Nevertheless, physically the distance is relatively smaller. They can hug each other like children with parents for gratitude. Thai students that hug teachers are a shock for Chinese students where physical touch might be a cause of problems in China. Chinese always have a tradition of respecting teacher, and will never have physical contact with their teachers.

3.5.2 Sex and gender mixture

Thailand represents femininity with a score of 34 while China with 66 represents masculinity. It is quite obvious that in Thailand both social genders overlap, and they behave gently and pay attention to life qualities. The gender differences have clear characteristics. Amongst the Chinese interviewees, 75% of males respect and understand the phenomenon of LGBT, except the master's student who studied in a Korean university. He is from the northeast province of China which is close to Korea. He identifies only with typical gender roles in China and Korea, so he has difficulties in understanding non-binary individuals. The two female participants who are all from the south of China accept it totally. One thinks that Thailand is more civilized about this development trend, and the other has a good friend as a "transgendered woman" who takes care of her like a mother. Students from the south of China tend to accept new ideas and phenomena easier. The new generation in China is also less masculine.

3.5.3 Confusing politeness

Thai embodies politeness in many ways, such as wearing the right outfit for the right occasion, avoiding pointing to people with their feet, and speaking softly in public, etc. But on certain occasions, they might take off their slippers or shoes and sit cross-legged, such as eating. They can sit on the ground easily without considering if it is dirty according to a Chinese view.

The participants feel positive towards a received smile from "Land of Smiles", which is consistent with Samovar et al. (2017). It is said that outsiders cannot read the smile of a Thai person as there are so many variations depending on the purpose and meaning. Chinese participants do not build a deep relationship with Thai, so they cannot tell the difference. They

all take their Thai smile as a way to express friendliness.

3.5.4 Value barriers

Cultural values are hidden at the core of social culture. They are revealed from time to time and become barriers to intercultural adaptation.

As far as language is concerned, contradicting Schumann's acquisition theory, although Thailand and China seem to have smaller social distance and Chinese are welcomed by the Thai tourism, they do not contribute to learning Thai language. In line with Songsirisak, English and Thai languages are the crucial factors for Chinese student adjustment in Thai universities. Thai teachers' English accent can be problematic for comprehension is in line with Nomnian.

Learning English seems more important. As two female interviewees had planned, studying in Thailand at an international university is a bridge to English-speaking countries for further study. They have also spent a lot of time and effort in improving their English to meet university requirements, so leaving little or no time to study Thai. All participants stay in their Chinese circle: having Chinese roommates; attending class with Chinese friends; having a social life with Chinese, etc. There are even Chinese restaurants inside or near the campus, and not knowing Thai does not seem to be a problem when it comes to the goals of the student.

In addition, Thai Tourism has a deep reliance on Chinese tourism and students. Learning Chinese for Thais seems to be more motivating and advantageous than the other way round. Therefore, learning Thai is not a must in the international university lives for most Chinese students, as there is no real incentive. Further, lacking deep contact with their Thai classmates means they do not have much curiosity in Thai language and culture as they are not fully immersed. According to the survey, language factor in the Thai international university adaptation is only 18%, but 46% is of getting along with Thai people. The reason for the lower percentage may be that students can communicate at least in English inside international campuses. Most, however, will stay within their clique Chinese groups and will not integrate with Thai students. Lacking motivation for learning the local language seems to be a forever barrier of intercultural adaption for Chinese students.

As for Thai food, the interview corresponds with Nomnian which has a major impact on adaptation. Six interviewees all dislike Thai food no matter how long they have stayed in Thailand. Once the first impression fossilizes, it is hard to learn to adapt to Thai food. Food seems to be the most difficult thing to adapt to in intercultural adaptation. In this aspect, they use a separation strategy to avoid eating Thai food. It confirms what Li [2] asserts, Chinese students use differ-

ent strategies towards Thai host culture. However, the survey also demonstrates Thai food wins 30% hearts of participants, being the most adapted.

As Kim asserts that adaptation is a growth experience under stress, from the participants themselves, it is obvious to recognize if they have grown through the process of adaptation. S1 has a lot of traveling experience and had a Korean bachelor's degree. Although self-assertive and with many intercultural experiences, he seems hard to accept what he has not seen before, such as LBGT and alcohol ban on campus. S3 and S6 both are good observers. They noticed the speaking volume of Thais, then adapted to lower their voices in public. S1 is an example of using his own experience or mentality to see Thai culture, lacking the opportunity to learn how they react or think, and this seems to stop him from growing and seeing life from a different perspective.

Chinese freshmen who are used to the crowded environment in China seem unaware of their loud volume, body movement, self-centeredness (not quite thoughtful for others), and ignoring the rules to some degree. When taking the tram or van, being afraid of missing and rushing to get in without considering the others lining up before them is the norm. The habit of staying with Chinese friends all the time and letting them live the same lifestyles as they had in China is discouraged. It becomes more difficult for them to observe how Thai behave, to know how Thais think or act.

4. Conclusion and Implications

Under a mainly qualitative study, dynamic and complicated intercultural adaptation aspects were explored and analyzed. In the international university field, Chinese students need to adapt to a Thai university studying culture, such as independent learning; administrative culture, and common English communication skills; interpersonal culture, such as building a friendship with Thais; social culture, such as alcohol bans; eating habits, such as cold drinks, daily habits, such as removing one's shoes; along with nonverbal communication, such as avoiding to use one's feet to point to with. With this survey result, language is the key factor to getting along with Thais and studying at an international university in Thailand. Thai food is tricky since it can be the most adapted and the most unadapted culture. For the unadapted students, time will not help them to adapt.

Facing the prospect of local student numbers reducing, there is a push to attract more Chinese students as a way to keep a school running. From the findings presented herein, Thai universities could take the content of interviews and observation as intercultural training examples for Chinese student orientation in order to help them adapt to Thai culture sooner and more successfully. With the limited time and effort, the results

could be a reference for quantitative research in measuring cultural factors in the future.

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