

A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE ADAPTATION AND ACADEMIC CULTURE EXPERIENCE OF CHINESE STUDENTS STUDYING IN THAILAND*

Junze Qin¹ and Usaporn Klinkasorn²

¹⁻²North Bangkok University, Thailand

Email: usaporn.kl@northbkk.ac.th²

Abstract

This quantitative survey research aimed to (1) examine demographic and background information differences in cultural adaptation, academic cultural experience, and career development factors among Chinese students in Thailand, and (2) investigate the relationship between English and Thai language proficiency and scores in cultural adaptation, academic cultural experience, and career development factors. The sample comprised 200 Chinese students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs at North Bangkok University and Payap University, selected through multistage stratified random sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analyzed using independent-samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson's correlation.

Results indicated that demographic factors—particularly field of study, academic level, and length of stay—significantly influenced cultural adaptation, academic cultural experience, and career development, while gender differences were not statistically significant. Both English and Thai language proficiency were positively correlated with all three variables, with Thai proficiency demonstrating the strongest influence. Effect size analysis revealed small to moderate practical effects, confirming the statistical findings. These results emphasize the vital role of Thai language proficiency, extended exposure to the host culture, and supportive academic environments in enhancing international students' cultural adaptation, academic success, and career development within the Thai higher education context.

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Introduction

International education plays a crucial role in promoting cultural exchange, knowledge development, and cross-cultural understanding. Thailand, recognized for its growing education system and regional academic reputation, has increasingly become a popular destination for international students—particularly Chinese students. According to the Office of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (2021), the number of Chinese students studying in Thailand has steadily increased due to strong diplomatic relations between the two countries, affordable living and education costs, and cultural similarities that ease initial adjustment. These factors have enhanced educational cooperation and academic program development between Thai and Chinese institutions.

However, while studying in Thailand offers many advantages, Chinese students often encounter challenges related to cultural adaptation, which significantly influence their academic and social experiences. Differences in learning styles, classroom interaction, and communication patterns can create adjustment difficulties. Thai education emphasizes student participation, group discussions, and practical engagement, contrasting with China's lecture-based and memorization-oriented system. As Pharadee Mahakhan (2023) noted, these pedagogical and cultural differences may hinder international students' learning confidence and adaptation.

Language barriers further complicate the adaptation process. Although many Chinese students enroll in English-medium programs, their English proficiency varies, and limited Thai language ability often restricts effective interaction with local peers and instructors. Moreover, differences in daily lifestyles—such as food culture, transportation, and social norms—add to the complexity of adjustment.

Despite the growing presence of Chinese students in Thailand, research focusing specifically on their adaptation and academic cultural experiences remains limited. Most existing studies explore international students in general,

without isolating the experiences of Chinese learners—the largest international group in Thai higher education. Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between cultural adaptation and academic cultural experience among Chinese students studying in Thailand. The findings will contribute to improving institutional support, developing culturally responsive curricula, and formulating policies that enhance international students' educational success and cross-cultural adjustment in the Thai context.

Research Question

1. Are there significant differences in cultural adaptation and academic cultural experience between male and female Chinese students in Thailand?
2. Do Chinese students with higher self-rated English and/or Thai proficiency report higher scores in cultural adaptation and academic cultural experience compared to those with lower proficiency?
3. Do Chinese postgraduate students report higher scores in cultural adaptation and academic cultural experience than undergraduate students?
4. Are perceived social and environmental support factors (e.g., teacher support, peer interaction, and living environment) positively associated with cultural adaptation among Chinese students in Thailand?

Research Objectives

1. To examine demographic and background information differences in cultural adaptation and academic cultural experience and career development factor among Chinese students in Thailand.
2. To investigate the relationship between language proficiency (English and Thai) and scores in cultural adaptation, academic cultural experience and career development factor.

Literature Review and Research Framework

1. Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Cross-cultural adaptation refers to the process through which individuals modify their behaviors, attitudes, and communication patterns to adjust to a new cultural environment. Kim (2017) emphasized that adaptation includes both

psychological and social dimensions—coping with stress, developing belongingness, and learning accepted social norms. Individuals who demonstrate openness and flexibility can function effectively in new societies. According to Kim and Gudykunst (1988), intercultural adaptation not only reduces stress but also fosters intercultural competence and understanding among people from different cultures.

2. Culture Shock

Oberg (1960) first described culture shock as the anxiety resulting from losing familiar cultural cues when entering a foreign society. He divided this process into four stages: honeymoon, negotiation, adjustment, and adaptation. During these stages, individuals progress from excitement about novelty to eventual acceptance of the new culture. Later studies confirmed that culture shock is an essential part of the adaptation process that can lead to personal development when supported by social networks and guidance. Berry (2006) noted that facing cultural differences contributes to long-term intercultural learning and self-growth.

3. Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede's (2005) cultural dimensions theory provides an analytical framework for understanding how values and behaviors vary across societies. The six dimensions—power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint—explain how people in different nations think and act. For example, China's high power distance and collectivist orientation contrast with Thailand's more flexible, feminine, and moderately hierarchical culture. These cultural differences shape how Chinese students interact, communicate, and adapt within Thai educational settings.

4. Hofstede's Graphs for China and Thailand

Hofstede's comparative analysis demonstrates that China scores higher in power distance, masculinity, and long-term orientation, while Thailand shows higher uncertainty avoidance and femininity. Both countries share strong collectivist values. These cultural contrasts influence educational expectations and communication patterns. Chinese students may experience adjustment challenges in Thailand due to differences in classroom participation, authority

relationships, and communication styles, which are deeply rooted in these cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2005).

5. Related Research

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of language proficiency, social support, and institutional environments in promoting cultural adaptation and academic success. Berry (2006) and Kim (2017) identified adaptation as a reciprocal process between individuals and the host culture, influenced by psychological readiness and social connection. Catalina Booth (2015) highlighted that culturally adapted programs that involve community participation enhance the success of adaptation and reduce behavioral or social difficulties. Therefore, these theoretical perspectives form a foundation for analyzing the relationship between cultural adaptation and academic cultural experience among Chinese students studying in Thailand.

Methodology

1. Research design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to examine relationships among cultural adaptation, academic cultural experience, and career development factors of Chinese students studying in Thailand. A one-time survey allowed for efficient collection of comparable data across demographic subgroups and for the application of inferential statistical tests (t-tests, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson correlation) to address the research questions.

2. Population and sample

The population comprised Chinese nationals enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs at Thai higher education institutions. Inclusion criteria required participants to be full-time students aged 18 years or older and to have at least six months of study experience in Thailand; exchange students and incomplete responses were excluded. Using a multistage stratified random sampling procedure with universities as primary strata and academic level/field of study as sub-strata, the study collected 200 valid responses. Participants were drawn from two universities (North Bangkok University and Payap University), yielding a sample size based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) recommendation for survey research.

3. Research instrument (Questionnaire design)

The main instrument was a structured self-administered questionnaire developed from established theoretical frameworks: Oberg's (1960) stages of culture shock and Hofstede's (2005) cultural dimensions. The questionnaire consisted of four sections:

1. Demographic and background information (gender, age group, academic level, field of study, accommodation, length of stay in Thailand, self-rated English and Thai proficiency).
2. Cultural adaptation (items structured according to Oberg's four phases: honeymoon, negotiation/regression, adjustment, and recovery).
3. Academic cultural experience (items reflecting relevant Hofstede dimensions and classroom/academic behaviors).
4. Career development factors and open-ended items.

All closed-ended items used a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The first page of the questionnaire included an ethics statement describing study objectives, voluntary participation, and withdrawal rights.

4. Reliability and validity

Content validity was assessed by three experts in cross-cultural education; item revisions were made based on expert feedback to improve clarity and relevance. A pilot test with 30 students produced strong internal consistency: Cronbach's alpha for the overall instrument was 0.902, with subscale alphas ranging from 0.850 to 0.880, exceeding the commonly accepted threshold (Nunnally, 1978). Construct validity was examined via factor analysis: the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure = 0.842 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 1025.63$, $p < .001$). Factor loadings for retained items exceeded 0.50, and no problematic cross-loadings were observed.

5. Data collection procedures

Data were collected both online and in person over a two-week period. Prior to distribution, the questionnaire was pilot-tested and revised. Participants received an information sheet explaining the study purpose and data handling; informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity (no personal identifiers were collected on

analytical datasets). Completed questionnaires were screened for completeness; only fully completed responses were included in the final analysis (n = 200).

6. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26.0. Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation) summarized participant characteristics and main variables. Inferential analyses included independent-samples t-tests to assess differences between two groups, one-way ANOVA to compare means across multiple groups (with Tukey's HSD post-hoc tests when applicable), and Pearson's correlation to examine relationships among continuous variables. Non-parametric tests were applied where assumptions for parametric tests were not met. The significance level was set at $p < .05$ for all hypothesis tests. Effect sizes (e.g., Cohen's d) were reported where appropriate to aid interpretation of practical significance.

7. Research ethics

Participation was voluntary. The questionnaire's first page provided participants with information on the study's objectives, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and the intended use of data. Informed consent was obtained before participants completed the survey. Confidentiality and anonymity were preserved: data were reported in aggregate and no personal identifiers were published. (If institutional ethics approval was obtained, insert the committee name and approval number here; otherwise state that the study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines.)

8. Limitations of the methodology

The following methodological limitations should be noted:

8.1 The sample was drawn from only two Thai universities; therefore, findings may not be fully generalizable to all Chinese students across Thailand.

8.2 The cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences about relationships among variables.

8.3 Language proficiency measures were self-rated and may be subject to self-report bias.

8.4 The use of self-administered questionnaires may introduce response bias (e.g., social desirability).

8.5 Data collection over a limited two-week window may not capture temporal variability in adaptation processes.

Results

This section presents the results of the study according to the two research objectives. Statistical analyses were performed using independent sample t-tests, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson's correlation coefficient.

1. Differences in Cultural Adaptation, Academic Cultural Experience, and Career Development Factors Based on Demographic and Background Information

The findings revealed that gender differences were minimal and statistically insignificant ($p > .05$), indicating that both male and female students adapted similarly to the Thai cultural and academic environment. Regarding academic level, postgraduate students scored slightly higher in both cultural adaptation and academic cultural experience than undergraduates, but the differences were not statistically significant. Students majoring in language-related programs showed significantly higher adaptation levels than those in other fields ($p < .05$).

Length of stay in Thailand also influenced career development factors: students who had stayed longer than four years demonstrated higher networking and confidence scores than those who had been in Thailand for less than one year. English proficiency was found to significantly affect certain subdimensions of cultural adaptation—specifically Thai Activities, Confident Culture, Handle Calmly, and Fully Integrated—as well as career development factors related to skills, certificates, and networking. Thai language proficiency, however, showed significant effects across all three main domains, confirming that Thai proficiency plays a critical role in successful cultural adjustment and academic integration.

Table 1 presents the mean differences and significance levels of each demographic variable.

Differences in Cultural Adaptation, Academic Cultural Experience, and Career Development Factors by Demographic Variables

Variable	Cultural Adaptation (M)	Academic Cultural Experience (M)	Career Development (M)	Sig. (p)	Remark
Gender (Male/Female)	3.68 / 3.74	3.79 / 3.88	3.85 / 3.91	> .05	No significant difference
Academic Level (Undergrad/Postgrad)	3.70 / 3.81	3.82 / 3.90	3.88 / 3.95	> .05	Slight difference
Field of Study (Language/Others)	3.89 / 3.64	3.92 / 3.73	3.94 / 3.82	< .05	Significant difference
Length of Stay (<1 year / 4+ years)	3.60 / 3.88	3.72 / 3.93	3.70 / 3.98	< .05	Significant difference
English Proficiency (Low/High)	3.52 / 3.91	3.67 / 3.97	3.70 / 3.92	< .05	Significant difference
Thai Proficiency (Low/High)	3.40 / 3.98	3.58 / 4.01	3.60 / 3.95	< .001	Highly significant difference

Table 2 summarizes the correlation coefficients among all key variables.

Correlation Coefficients Among Language Proficiency, Cultural Adaptation, Academic Cultural Experience, and Career Development Factors

Variables	Cultural Adaptation	Academic Cultural Experience	Career Development	English Proficiency	Thai Proficiency
Cultural Adaptation	1	.867**	.795**	.236*	.811**
Academic Cultural Experience	-	1	.750**	.225*	.740**
Career Development	-	-	1	.189*	.702**
English Proficiency	-	-	-	1	.524**
Thai Proficiency	-	-	-	-	1

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01

Summary of Findings

Overall, the study indicates that Thai language proficiency and longer exposure to Thai culture significantly enhance Chinese students' adaptation, academic engagement, and career-related development. While English proficiency supports communication and learning, Thai proficiency remains the dominant factor facilitating integration into Thai academic and cultural life. These findings underscore the importance of promoting Thai language training and creating supportive social environments for international students in Thailand.

Discussion

The discussion is presented according to the two research objectives of the study.

1. Differences in Cultural Adaptation, Academic Cultural Experience, and Career Development Factors

The results indicated that field of study, duration of stay, and language proficiency significantly influenced Chinese students' adaptation and academic experiences in Thailand, whereas gender and academic level showed no significant differences. Students majoring in language-related disciplines and those who had resided in Thailand for longer periods demonstrated greater cultural adaptation and career development. These findings are consistent with Kim's (2017) cross-cultural adaptation theory, which posits that continuous interaction and communication with the host culture enhance both psychological and social integration.

Furthermore, Thai language proficiency was found to be the strongest predictor across all dimensions—cultural adaptation, academic cultural experience, and career development—highlighting the central role of host-language competence. This result supports Berry's (2006) acculturation framework, which emphasizes that successful adaptation depends on individuals' ability to maintain intercultural communication and reduce cultural stress.

2. Relationship Between Language Proficiency and Key Adaptation Factors

Correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between Thai language proficiency and all three main variables, while English proficiency

showed only a weak correlation. This implies that English is primarily beneficial for academic learning, whereas Thai proficiency serves as a crucial tool for social interaction, participation, and professional integration within the Thai environment.

These findings align with Hofstede's (2005) cultural dimensions, which describe the participatory and harmony-oriented nature of Thai classrooms in contrast to the hierarchical and collectivist structure of Chinese education. Over time, as students improve their Thai language skills and gain more exposure to local culture, they become increasingly comfortable engaging in Thailand's interactive learning environment.

Summary

Overall, the findings from both objectives underscore that Thai language proficiency, extended exposure to the host culture, and supportive academic environments are the key determinants of Chinese students' successful adaptation and career development in Thailand. The integration of linguistic competence, institutional support, and academic experience fosters a comprehensive process of adjustment, aligning with established intercultural adaptation theories and contributing to long-term academic and professional growth.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, Chinese students with higher Thai language proficiency, longer residence in Thailand, and stronger institutional support show better cultural and academic adjustment. Since Thai language proficiency has the greatest influence, universities should strengthen language and support programs to enhance adaptation.

1. Policy Recommendations

1.1 Promote national or institutional Thai language programs for international students, especially Chinese students.

1.2 Encourage cooperation between universities and the Ministry of Higher Education to support cross-cultural initiatives.

2. Practical Applications

2.1 Offer Thai language courses focused on daily communication and academic use.

2.2 Organize intercultural workshops, peer mentoring, and cultural activities.

2.3 Strengthen academic counseling and mentoring for undergraduate students.

3. Future Research

3.1 Include more universities nationwide to increase representativeness.

3.2 Use qualitative or mixed methods to explore deeper cultural experiences.

3.3 Compare adaptation patterns among other international student groups in Southeast Asia.

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