

Navigating Language, Food, and Transportation: The Cross-Cultural Experiences of Chinese Students in Thailand

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of Chinese undergraduate students studying in Thailand, focusing on language barriers, food culture, and transportation issues. A total of 42 second-year Chinese students enrolled in a business program participated in semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that students predominantly used Chinese within their social groups, with limited interaction in English or Thai, which affected both academic performance and social integration. Many students reported difficulties with vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency, largely due to a lack of speaking practice in their English education in China. Regarding food, some students struggled with the taste of Thai cuisine, finding it either too sweet or too spicy, while others adapted and ate Thai food regularly. Additionally, while transportation was not a significant issue, the heat and distance for some students created minor discomforts. The study suggests that increased focus on language practice and cultural adaptation could improve the experience of Chinese students studying in Thailand.

Keywords: Chinese students, Thailand, language barriers, food culture, transportation, academic performance, social integration, English proficiency, cultural adaptation, international students.

Introduction

Studying in Thailand offers Chinese students an opportunity to experience a unique academic and cultural environment. Thailand attracts many international students due to its diverse educational programs and the chance to experience its rich traditions and modern developments. The country is known for its beautiful landscapes and vibrant food culture. However, students often face difficulties in adjusting to the local language, food, and transportation systems. This paper examines how Chinese undergraduate students in Thailand navigate issues related to language, public transport, and food culture. These factors shape their daily lives and academic experiences in the country.

Language barriers present a significant issue for Chinese students in Thailand, especially in academic settings. Many Thai people can communicate in basic English, but students often find it difficult to fully engage in lectures and discussions. This paper discusses the specific communication issues that Chinese students encounter, including difficulties in understanding technical terminology and participating in class. Additionally, daily life activities, such as asking for directions, ordering food, or negotiating rent, can be complicated due to language differences. The food culture in Thailand also presents differences that students need to adjust to. Thai cuisine, with its use of ingredients like lemongrass, chili peppers, and fish sauce, differs greatly from Chinese food. This adjustment

to Thai food adds to the overall adaptation process for Chinese students living and studying in Thailand.

Chinese students studying in Thailand often face significant difficulties when adapting to the local language, food, and transportation systems. Despite the growing number of international students in the country, the challenges related to communication barriers, unfamiliar food culture, and navigating public transportation remain underexplored. The lack of fluency in Thai or English can hinder academic success and everyday activities, making it difficult for students to engage fully with their studies and social life. Furthermore, adjusting to the local food culture, which is distinct from Chinese culinary traditions, can create additional obstacles. Understanding the extent of these issues is vital for addressing the needs of Chinese students and improving their overall experience in Thailand (Packer, 2025; Postings, 2025).

This research aims to contribute to the understanding of the specific difficulties faced by Chinese students studying in Thailand. By examining language barriers, food culture, and transportation issues, the study will provide valuable insights into the practical challenges that hinder students' ability to adapt and integrate into their new environment. The findings will help universities, policymakers, and support organizations design targeted interventions to enhance the experience of international students, ensuring they can thrive academically and socially. Moreover, the research will shed light on how these challenges can influence students' well-being, academic performance, and cultural integration, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and supportive international student community in Thailand.

Literature Review

The increasing number of Chinese students choosing to pursue their degrees in upper northern Thailand, particularly after the Chinese government's recent educational reforms, highlights an evolving trend in international higher education. Despite the growth of this trend, the process of cross-cultural adaptation remains a significant challenge for Chinese students and directly influences their academic success. Sun et al. (2020) aimed to investigate Chinese students' performance in four areas of cross-cultural adaptation: social-cultural, academic, environmental, and psychological. The study, which surveyed 314 students from eight northern Thai universities, identified that students' adaptation followed a typical "U-Curve" pattern, meaning that students initially faced challenges but gradually adjusted. The research further identified eleven primary challenges faced by Chinese students, including issues with campus life, course comprehension, job prospects, and integration into Thai society. These findings underscore the need for tailored support systems at Thai universities to ease students' adaptation and improve their academic performance.

A similar investigation into the experiences of Chinese students in Thailand highlights the complex nature of their cultural adaptation. Jiang et al. (2024) used qualitative methods to examine the adaptation processes of 37 Chinese students majoring in management. Their findings revealed that a range of factors—such as environmental changes, socio-cultural integration, economic conditions, and urban-rural disparities—shaped students' adaptation strategies. These factors not only influenced how students adjusted to life in Thailand but also illuminated broader themes in the adaptation process. The study emphasized that understanding the multiple layers of adaptation could better inform policies to support international students. Moreover, the research underlined the significance of fostering inclusive environments within educational institutions and local communities, helping transnational students thrive academically and socially.

Nomnian (2018) further explored the educational differences between China and Thailand, focusing on Chinese students' expectations and their experiences of learning English in Thailand. The concept of "cultures of learning" was central to this study, which examined how Chinese students' learning styles were shaped by both Chinese and Thai educational cultures. The research found that Chinese students often encountered a mismatch between their educational expectations and the teaching methods employed in Thai universities. Factors such as differing pedagogical philosophies, values, and cultural contexts were found to influence the students' learning strategies and classroom interactions. This study suggests that understanding these cultural differences is essential for improving teaching methodologies, especially in cross-cultural educational settings, and ensuring that international students receive an educational experience that is both effective and culturally appropriate.

Ye (2020) focused on the factors influencing Chinese students' decisions to study in Thailand, employing a survey of 402 students across 20 universities. The study found that several factors—economic, political, social, cultural, and personal—significantly impacted the decision-making process, with economic factors being the most influential. Additionally, the research identified the primary sources of information that students relied upon during their application process, such as educational agents, joint programs, and online platforms. Understanding these factors is crucial for Thai universities as they aim to attract more international students, particularly from China, by addressing the elements that play a role in students' decisions and enhancing their recruitment strategies.

Raktham (2015) conducted research on Chinese students' preparation for studying in Thailand and their adjustment to the Thai academic and social environment. Prior to departure, the students received orientation and Thai language lessons, which were deemed useful by the students. However, after three months in Thailand, many students reported academic difficulties, such as inadequate programs, inferior teaching styles, and language barriers. These challenges were seen as more pressing than socio-cultural adjustments, which are commonly discussed in literature on international students. The study's findings suggest that Chinese students' primary challenges lie in the academic sphere rather than social integration, highlighting a gap in the support systems provided by Thai universities for international students facing academic difficulties.

In an effort to improve Chinese students' language acquisition and cultural understanding, Talodpob et al. (2025) explored the role of extracurricular activities in teaching Thai as a foreign language at North Bangkok University. Their research showed that Chinese students preferred learning Thai through real-life activities outside the classroom, such as cooking Thai food or learning through songs. The study also identified speaking Thai as the most challenging aspect of language learning, with students requesting more opportunities to practice in daily life contexts. These findings suggest that language learning for international students can be significantly enhanced through interactive, culturally immersive activities, which not only promote language acquisition but also provide deeper cultural understanding.

Lertpusit (2022) compared Thailand's potential as an education hub with Malaysia, examining factors that attract Chinese students to both countries. The study found that Malaysia's government investment in higher education institutions has positioned it as a competitive destination for international students. In contrast, Thailand has not consistently prioritized international education and lacks a coherent national strategy to attract foreign students. This disparity has led to fewer international students choosing Thailand for their studies, despite the country's strong cultural appeal. The study emphasizes that while Thailand's unique cultural assets, such as the Thai language and culture, could serve as a powerful pull factor, Thai universities must adopt more proactive strategies and government support to capitalize on this potential and attract international students.

These studies offer valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by Chinese students studying in Thailand. From their adjustment to academic environments to their cultural integration and language learning, these studies highlight the multifaceted nature of cross-cultural adaptation. They underscore the importance of providing tailored support systems at both the institutional and governmental levels, as well as the need for more proactive strategies to enhance the experience of international students in Thailand. Understanding these dynamics is essential for improving the educational environment and ensuring that international students can succeed both academically and socially.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of Chinese undergraduate students studying in Thailand, specifically focusing on language barriers, food culture, and transportation issues. A total of 42 second-year Chinese students enrolled in a business program at a university in Thailand were selected as participants. The sample was mixed-gender, ensuring a diverse representation of experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' personal experiences and perceptions regarding the challenges they faced in adapting to life in Thailand. Open-ended questions were used during the interviews to encourage detailed responses and provide rich, contextual data. The questions aimed to elicit information about students' difficulties with communication in academic and social settings, their experiences with Thai food and dining culture, and the challenges they encountered when using public transportation.

The interviews were conducted in a comfortable, confidential setting to encourage open and honest responses. Each participant was informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained before the interview began. The data collected were analyzed thematically to identify common patterns and recurring themes in students' responses. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the issues faced by Chinese students in Thailand. Ethical considerations were a primary concern throughout the research process. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and their identities were anonymized in any publications or reports. Participation was voluntary, and students had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Additionally, the research ensured that participants were not subjected to any harm or discomfort during the interview process.

Results and Discussion

The interviews revealed several consistent themes regarding the language, food, and transportation experiences of Chinese students in Thailand. In terms of language use, most students (93%) did not speak much English outside of the classroom. They primarily communicated in Chinese within their social groups and had limited interaction with Thai people. This language barrier affected both their academic work and social integration. Many students (71%) reported difficulties with grammar and, more significantly, a lack of vocabulary. These issues made it hard to express complex ideas, particularly in academic settings. Most students also had difficulties with pronunciation and fluency, making natural speech difficult. It was noted that English classes in China focused less on speaking practice, leaving students unprepared for real-life communication in English-speaking environments.

Regarding food, opinions varied. Some students (35%) found Thai food too sweet or too spicy, and some avoided it altogether. Others, however, had become accustomed to the taste

and ate Thai food regularly. A few students (15%) mentioned that portion sizes were smaller than expected and not as filling. In terms of transportation, students did not view it as a significant issue. Most students (81%) lived in university housing close to campus and could walk to classes and nearby amenities. However, the heat was noted as uncomfortable during the day. Public transportation in the area was generally adequate, and students felt the proximity to the city center made daily commuting easy. Overall, transportation was not a major concern, although the heat was an occasional discomfort.

The results from the interviews indicate that language, food, and transportation are important factors shaping the experiences of Chinese students in Thailand. Language was a significant issue. Most students did not speak English outside of the classroom and communicated in Chinese within their social groups. This limited interaction with Thai people affected both academic work and social integration. Many students had difficulty with vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency, making it hard to express complex ideas. These difficulties were linked to English instruction in China, which focused more on reading and writing than on speaking practice. As a result, students were unprepared for English communication in real-life situations.

Food and transportation were less problematic. Students had mixed opinions about Thai food. Some found it too sweet or spicy, while others adjusted to the taste. A few students also noted that portion sizes were smaller than expected. Transportation was not a major issue for most students. They lived close to campus and could easily walk to classes and nearby amenities. The heat during the day was an occasional discomfort, but public transportation was sufficient for daily needs. In conclusion, language barriers significantly impacted students' academic and social experiences, while food and transportation required some adjustment but did not present major obstacles. Improving language preparedness and cultural adaptation may enhance the experience for international students.

These findings reflect how language, food, and the environment shape the experiences of Chinese students in Thailand. The limited use of English outside the classroom, along with vocabulary and pronunciation issues, affected academic and social interactions. Food and transportation were less problematic but still presented some adjustments. The study suggests that more focus on speaking practice and cultural adaptation could improve the student experience.

The findings of this study reveal a complex pattern of adaptation challenges faced by Chinese undergraduate students in Thailand, with language barriers emerging as the most significant obstacle to successful integration. The results confirm previous research by Sun et al. (2020) and Jiang et al. (2024) regarding the multifaceted nature of cross-cultural adaptation, while providing specific insights into how language, food, and transportation issues manifest in students' daily experiences.

The most striking finding relates to language use patterns among Chinese students, which demonstrates a concerning level of linguistic isolation. The fact that students primarily communicate in Chinese within their social groups and have limited interaction with Thai people suggests the formation of linguistic enclaves that may inadvertently hinder integration. This pattern aligns with Nomnian's (2018) observations about the mismatch between Chinese students' educational expectations and the reality of studying in Thailand. The students' difficulties with vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency reflect deeper systemic issues in English language preparation in China, where instruction traditionally emphasizes reading and writing skills over oral communication. This educational approach leaves students inadequately prepared for the communicative demands of studying abroad, where speaking and listening skills are crucial for academic success and social integration.

The impact of these language barriers extends beyond mere communication difficulties to affect students' overall academic and social experiences. The inability to express complex ideas effectively in English creates obstacles not only in classroom participation and academic discourse but also in forming meaningful relationships with local students and community members. This linguistic limitation perpetuates a cycle of isolation, where students retreat into Chinese-speaking communities for comfort, thereby reducing opportunities for English practice and cultural immersion. The findings suggest that many students may be missing out on the full benefits of international education due to these communication constraints.

Regarding food culture adaptation, the results present a more nuanced picture than might be expected. While some students struggle with the sweetness and spiciness of Thai cuisine, others have successfully adapted to local flavors, indicating that food adjustment is highly individual and potentially more manageable than language barriers. The mention of smaller portion sizes as a concern suggests that food adaptation involves not only taste preferences but also expectations about meal structure and satisfaction. However, the relatively moderate nature of food-related challenges compared to language issues indicates that students possess greater flexibility in dietary adaptation than in linguistic acquisition.

The finding that transportation is not considered a major issue by most students reflects the practical benefits of living in university housing close to campus. The walkability of the campus environment and adequate public transportation infrastructure appear to mitigate potential mobility challenges. However, the recurring mention of heat discomfort during daytime travel suggests that environmental factors play a role in students' daily experiences and may influence their willingness to explore beyond their immediate campus environment.

The contrast between the severity of language challenges and the relative manageability of food and transportation issues highlights the hierarchical nature of adaptation challenges. While practical matters like transportation can often be resolved through infrastructure and proximity, language barriers represent more fundamental obstacles that require sustained effort and systematic intervention. This hierarchy aligns with Raktham's (2015) findings that academic difficulties often outweigh socio-cultural adjustment challenges for Chinese students in Thailand.

The study's findings also raise questions about the effectiveness of pre-departure preparation programs. Despite some institutions providing orientation and language lessons, as noted by Raktham (2015), students continue to arrive inadequately prepared for the communicative demands of their new environment. This suggests that current preparation programs may need fundamental restructuring to address the gap between language instruction and practical communication needs.

Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge for improving the experiences of Chinese students studying in Thailand. Universities should implement comprehensive English language support programs that extend beyond traditional classroom instruction to include conversational practice sessions, peer mentoring programs pairing Chinese students with local or international English-speaking students, and structured opportunities for cross-cultural interaction. These programs should specifically target the oral communication skills that students identify as most challenging, incorporating practical scenarios such as academic discussions, social conversations, and daily life interactions.

Institutions should also consider establishing bridge programs that help students transition from Chinese educational contexts to Thai academic environments. These programs could include intensive English communication workshops, cultural orientation sessions that address not only Thai culture but also international academic expectations, and gradual integration activities that encourage interaction with local students while providing adequate

support. The programs should be designed to prevent the formation of linguistic enclaves by creating structured opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural engagement.

Thai universities should invest in faculty development programs to help instructors better support international students with diverse language backgrounds. This training should include strategies for facilitating classroom participation among students with varying English proficiency levels, techniques for providing feedback that encourages rather than intimidates students with language challenges, and methods for creating inclusive learning environments that value diverse perspectives and communication styles.

Support services should extend beyond the classroom to address the broader integration challenges identified in this study. Universities could establish international student centers that provide ongoing language support, cultural adaptation resources, and opportunities for cross-cultural exchange. These centers could organize regular social events, cultural immersion activities, and practical workshops that help students navigate daily life challenges while building confidence in their English communication skills.

The study also suggests that Chinese educational institutions should reconsider their English language curricula to better prepare students for international study experiences. This could involve increasing emphasis on oral communication skills, incorporating more interactive and communicative teaching methods, and providing students with realistic expectations about the language demands of studying abroad. Collaboration between Chinese and Thai educational institutions could facilitate the development of preparation programs that specifically address the challenges identified in this research.

For food-related adaptation, universities could consider providing dining options that accommodate diverse tastes while encouraging students to explore local cuisine gradually. This might include offering fusion options that bridge Chinese and Thai flavors, providing information about local ingredients and cooking methods, and organizing cultural food events that create positive associations with Thai cuisine.

Transportation infrastructure improvements, while less critical according to this study, could still enhance students' overall experience. Universities might consider providing information about local transportation options, organizing group activities that help students explore the broader community, and ensuring that campus shuttle services accommodate the heat-related concerns students expressed.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This study reveals the various difficulties faced by Chinese undergraduate students studying in Thailand, particularly related to language barriers, food culture, and transportation. Language issues, especially the limited use of English and challenges with vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency, significantly impact both academic performance and social integration. Although some students have adapted to Thai food, many find it too sweet or spicy, and the smaller portion sizes pose another adjustment. Transportation was not a major issue for most students due to the proximity of their accommodation to campus; however, the heat and occasional discomfort still affected their daily routines. Overall, the findings suggest that addressing language proficiency, providing more opportunities for practical communication, and supporting cultural adaptation could enhance the experience of Chinese students in Thailand, increasing better academic and social outcomes.

Further research could explore the long-term impact of language proficiency on the academic success and social integration of Chinese students in Thailand. Future studies might examine how different teaching methods or language support programs, such as conversation practice or immersive language experiences, influence students' ability to

overcome communication barriers. Additionally, research could investigate how the adjustment to Thai food culture evolves over time and how it affects students' overall well-being and sense of belonging. Another area for further exploration could be the role of social networks and peer support in helping students navigate these cultural challenges. Finally, comparative studies between students from different countries could provide a broader understanding of how cultural differences in food, language, and transportation are experienced by international students in Thailand.

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