

## Advantages and Challenges of Chinese Doctoral Degree Students Studying in International Programs in Thailand

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### Abstract

With globalization, many Chinese students choose to study in Thailand. The decision to study in Thailand is influenced by personal, economic, policy, institutional, and cultural factors. The study found that respondents considered studying in Thailand to be cost-effective, geographically convenient, and accessible due to the low language barrier. Most students found the cost of living met expectations, although some still felt financial pressure. Students encountered problems with the visa application process, particularly communication barriers, even with access to information. Most participants recognized the internationalization of Thai universities, but opinions on teaching quality varied. In terms of cultural adaptation, dietary issues were the primary difficulty, with religious factors having a minor impact. Overall, the appeal of studying in Thailand lies in its low cost and international environment, with visa procedures, varying teaching quality, and cultural adaptation posing obstacles.

**Keywords:** Chinese students, International programs, Study abroad, Advantages and challenges.

### Introduction

Recent data shows that an increasing number of mainland Chinese students are choosing to study in Southeast Asia rather than Western countries. This shift is primarily due to the relatively lower costs of education in the region and the competitive nature of graduate entrance exams in China. Experts argue that affordable education options in Southeast Asia, combined with difficulties in securing postgraduate spots in China, make countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore more attractive. Many students, particularly those who fail China's postgraduate exams, seek education abroad as an alternative (Sharma, 2023).

Surveys indicate that 40% to 66% of students who fail the postgraduate exam in China apply to universities in Asia. With around three million students annually failing to gain admission to graduate programs, this trend is expected to rise. Additionally, the White Paper on Studying in China reports that staying close to home has become more appealing after the COVID-19 pandemic, with Southeast Asia emerging as a preferred destination due to its cultural proximity and lower costs (Sharma, 2023).

In Southeast Asia, Chinese students now represent a significant proportion of the international student population. For example, Chinese students account for more than 60% of foreign students in both Malaysia and Thailand. This trend reflects the ease of cultural adaptation and the relatively simple visa and admission processes compared to Western countries. As the Chinese government strengthens its ties with Southeast Asia, the region

has become a strategic destination for both education and employment prospects (Sharma, 2023).

Southeast Asia's universities, including those in Malaysia and Thailand, offer prestigious programs that are more accessible than those in the West. Furthermore, students in Southeast Asia may benefit from employment opportunities within the region after graduation. This, along with the growing trend of Chinese students returning to China with qualifications from Southeast Asian countries, underscores the increasing importance of these destinations for Chinese students seeking affordable and accessible international education (Sharma, 2023).

This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge regarding Chinese students' motivations and experiences when studying in Southeast Asia, specifically in Thailand. With globalization and shifting educational trends, Thailand has become an increasingly popular destination for Chinese students due to factors such as cost-effectiveness, geographical proximity, and ease of cultural adaptation. The study's significance lies in its ability to highlight the multifaceted reasons behind this growing trend, including personal, economic, policy, institutional, and cultural factors that influence decision-making.

Understanding these factors is important for universities and policymakers in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries aiming to attract more international students. The research provides valuable insights into the challenges and advantages faced by Chinese students, including issues related to visa applications, varying teaching quality, and cultural adaptation. By identifying these factors, the study can inform improvements in student support services, such as enhancing communication during the visa application process and addressing dietary concerns for cultural adaptation.

Furthermore, the findings underscore the importance of Southeast Asia as a viable alternative for Chinese students who may find it difficult to pursue higher education in Western countries due to financial or competitive constraints. As the demand for international education in Southeast Asia continues to rise, this research provides a timely and relevant understanding of the factors that influence Chinese students' decisions and how institutions can better serve this growing demographic. Ultimately, the study contributes to enhancing the study abroad experience for Chinese students and offers guidance for universities and stakeholders to refine strategies for attracting and supporting international students from China.

## **Literature Review**

Globalization has created significant opportunities for students to study abroad, promoting independence and offering experiences not available at local universities. The United States has the largest number of international students, but recently, more Chinese families have chosen to send their children to Southeast Asia. As China's population becomes more affluent, middle-income families are also able to afford the tuition fees of foreign universities. However, due to cost concerns, these families tend to select destinations with lower tuition fees, such as Malaysia, South Africa, Thailand, and Russia (Lin, 2014).

In October 2023, General Secretary Xi Jinping expressed his hopes for overseas students to continue the tradition of studying abroad to serve China. He emphasized their role in promoting innovation, fostering international exchanges, and contributing to national development. Since China's reform and opening up, over 8 million mainland Chinese students have studied abroad, with the total number, including those from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan, surpassing 10 million. These students have made significant contributions to China's economic, technological, and social development (Center for China and Globalization, 2023).

The 20th National Congress report stressed the importance of education, science, and talent in building a modern socialist country. As China moves forward with its modernization efforts, there is an increased demand for international talent to support scientific innovation, industrial transformation, and global governance. Overseas students play a vital role in these efforts. China remains the largest source of international students globally. In 2021, 1.021 million Chinese students were studying abroad, more than twice the number from India. Despite the pandemic's impact, the demand for overseas study remains strong. The destinations for Chinese students have become more diverse, with significant numbers studying in the US, UK, Australia, and countries within the Belt and Road Initiative, such as Malaysia and Thailand (Center for China and Globalization, 2023).

The choice of majors among Chinese students remains focused on STEM fields, with business studies seeing a decline. The trend of returning students is increasingly evident, with over 6 million students returning to China since the reform era. These students have become a crucial part of China's modernization and global participation (Center for China and Globalization, 2023).

Overseas students contribute significantly to China's scientific, economic, and cultural development. Many hold key positions in academia, business, and government. The increasing number of returned students also plays a role in global governance, as they bring international perspectives to China's policies and initiatives (Center for China and Globalization, 2023).

Furthermore, overseas students are instrumental in promoting China's people-to-people diplomacy and cultural exchanges. General Secretary Xi Jinping has acknowledged their potential in advancing mutual understanding between China and the world. These students, by sharing their experiences, help tell China's story and strengthen international relations, contributing to global peace and stability (Center for China and Globalization, 2023).

Xie (2022) explored the impact of transnational higher education (TNHE) partnerships in China on Chinese students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and their motivation to study abroad. With a growing trend of Chinese students experiencing cultural diversity, there remains limited research on the role TNHE partnerships play in preparing students for international study. Xie's qualitative case study at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China, a representative TNHE institution, used Byram's (2009) model of ICC for deductive thematic analysis. Findings revealed that Chinese students chose to study at TNHE institutions primarily for their English-focused learning environments. Furthermore, TNHE partnerships in China positively influenced students' ICC development, which in turn played a significant role in their motivation to study abroad.

Similarly, Gong, Gao, Li, and Lai (2021) examined the challenges and adaptation strategies of New Zealand students studying abroad in China. The study involved 15 participants who reflected on their experiences through journals and group interviews. Analysis identified various challenges, such as language barriers, lifestyle adjustments, academic differences, and sociocultural issues. In response, participants developed strategies to enhance their cognitive, emotional, and skill development to improve communication with local Chinese people. The study highlighted the need for language educators to update teaching methods and recommended offering counseling services to support students' cultural adaptation and language acquisition during study abroad programs.

Wang, Taplin, and Brown (2011) applied McLeod and Wainwright's framework to assess mainland Chinese students' satisfaction with the Chinese Curtin Student Accounting Academic Programme. A survey of Chinese students enrolled at Curtin University revealed that adequate preparation for studying in Australia, as well as an understanding of the cultural and instructional differences between China and Australia, was crucial for student success. The authors applied social learning theory, which suggests that behavior is shaped

by the expectation that specific actions will lead to desirable rewards. In this case, students who felt more prepared for their studies expressed higher levels of satisfaction with the program, highlighting the importance of preparation in study abroad experiences.

Yang, Webster, and Prosser (2011) investigated the goals, experiences, and learning outcomes of 214 undergraduates from a Hong Kong university who studied abroad or participated in internships/volunteer work across 20 countries. They introduced an experiential intercultural learning model to frame study abroad as a goal-driven process that enhances students' intercultural, disciplinary, career, and personal competencies. The study found strong interconnections between students' study abroad goals, their host country experiences, and learning outcomes. Analysis revealed that students who perceived alignment between their goals and learning outcomes showed greater personal development, intercultural growth, and career advancement. The findings suggest that to maximize the benefits of study abroad, students should be encouraged to set and pursue goals related to intercultural, personal, and academic/career growth.

These studies collectively emphasize the importance of goal-setting, cultural preparation, and experiential learning in maximizing the benefits of study abroad. They demonstrate that student satisfaction and personal development are closely linked to the intentional pursuit of intercultural and academic growth, as well as to the support systems provided during the study abroad experience.

The internationalization of higher education in Thailand has emerged as a critical area of academic inquiry, particularly in the context of regional competition within ASEAN and global economic pressures. This literature review examines existing research on international degree programs in Thailand, exploring their development, challenges, and effectiveness in attracting international students and preparing graduates for the global economy.

Sinhaneti (2011) establishes the foundational framework for understanding Thai higher education's mission, identifying four core principles that govern university operations: providing academic and professional education, conducting research for knowledge generation, offering public service, and preserving cultural heritage. The study highlights emerging trends including increased commercialization, international cooperation, and corporate social responsibility initiatives across both private and public universities. The research emphasizes the growing prevalence of faculty and student exchanges, international MOUs, and English-taught programs across various disciplines, positioning Thai institutions to serve as regional education hubs while maintaining focus on lifelong learning and community development.

Building upon this foundation, Kanjananiyot and Chaitiamwong (2018) provide a comprehensive 25-year analysis of Thailand's internationalization efforts since the First 15-Year Long-Range Plan on Higher Education (1990-2004). Their longitudinal study reveals gradual but positive results in terms of international student numbers, program offerings, and institutional partnerships. The researchers identify four critical factors influencing internationalization: Thai education reform, cultural traditions in educational administration, global education development, and ASEAN Economic Community realization. They emphasize that quality improvement remains essential for successful internationalization, requiring better policy alignment and resource maximization to achieve collective implementation of internationalization goals.

From a more critical perspective, Rhein (2017) examines five core problems facing international higher education in Thailand in the twenty-first century. The study positions Thailand's challenges within the broader ASEAN context, noting that other member states continue to outpace Thailand in higher education growth and quality. The research identifies demographic shifts, quality attainment issues, internationalization barriers, and sociocultural

factors as primary obstacles. Rhein argues that despite Thailand's geographic and social advantages for capitalizing on regional employment changes, rising education costs and limited English language accessibility prevent many Thai students from acquiring essential 21st-century skills, potentially threatening foreign investment and economic competitiveness.

Pongsin et al. (2023) contribute empirical evidence through mixed-methods research examining Thailand's position as an international education hub for Asian students. Their study, incorporating expert interviews, surveys, and autoethnographic approaches, documents dramatic growth in Asian student enrollment at Thai universities over two decades. The research identifies Thailand's competitive advantages as low costs, strategic location, quality campus facilities, and welcoming attitudes toward international students. However, the study also reveals significant disadvantages, particularly regarding the quality of international programs and English language capabilities among faculty and staff, highlighting the gap between quantity and quality in Thailand's internationalization efforts.

Chalapati (2024) provides historical context by examining the impact of economic globalization on Thai higher education following the 1997-1998 financial crisis. This thesis demonstrates how economic pressures led to comprehensive education reform, shifting focus from nation-building to human capital development. The research reveals how government and employer demands for globally relevant skills drove universities to emphasize English proficiency and establish English-medium business programs branded as "international." However, Chalapati critically questions the appropriateness of the "international" label for programs that often merely clone Western curricula, arguing for more holistic and integrated approaches to internationalization that consider Thai cultural characteristics and cross-cultural learning environments.

From the student experience perspective, Chaayasat (2020) offers insights into the acculturation challenges faced by international students in Thailand. Through qualitative research focusing on French exchange students, the study identifies four major areas of cross-cultural adjustment: linguistic limitations, culture shock and acculturative stress, cultural adaptation processes, and the need for supportive extracurricular activities. The research emphasizes the importance of understanding international students' lived experiences to develop effective support mechanisms and highlights the challenges of adapting to Thailand's collectivistic cultural context.

Ueaichimplee and Pihanthanond (2021) provide a comparative management perspective by analyzing international program operations across Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Hong Kong, and Singapore to develop frameworks for Thailand. Their research identifies critical management components including mission alignment, fee structures, curriculum design, authorization processes, and quality assurance mechanisms. The study distinguishes between International Programs (requiring cooperation with original program owners) and Bilingual Programs (requiring primarily domestic oversight), offering practical guidelines for program development and quality management in Thai institutions.

Finally, Theerasak and Pookkaman (2023) examine the motivational factors and experiences of foreign students participating in exchange programs at Burapha University International College. Through semi-structured interviews with 36 participants, the research identifies society and culture, affordability, and facilities and services as primary decision-making factors. The study reports overwhelmingly positive student experiences, with participants describing personal growth, valuable learning opportunities, and memorable experiences that contribute to their development as global citizens.

The literature reveals a complex landscape of international degree programs in Thailand characterized by significant growth and potential alongside persistent challenges. The research demonstrates that Thailand has made considerable progress in internationalization

over the past three decades, driven by economic pressures, regional competition, and government policy initiatives. Key strengths identified across studies include affordability, strategic location, welcoming cultural attitudes, and improving campus facilities.

However, several critical challenges emerge consistently throughout the literature. Quality concerns, particularly regarding English language proficiency among faculty and students, represent the most significant barrier to effective internationalization. The gap between the quantity of international programs and their actual quality remains problematic, with questions raised about the authenticity of "international" branding when programs simply replicate Western models without adequate cultural adaptation.

The literature also highlights the importance of student support services, cultural adaptation mechanisms, and comprehensive management frameworks for successful international program implementation. While student experiences are generally positive, the research emphasizes the need for better understanding of cross-cultural challenges and more effective support systems.

Overall, the literature suggests that Thailand's international degree programs show promise but require substantial improvements in quality assurance, faculty development, authentic internationalization approaches, and student support services to realize their full potential as competitive offerings in the regional and global higher education market.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research method using in-depth interviews to explore the factors influencing Chinese students' decisions to study in Thailand. The research specifically focused on personal, economic, policy, institutional, and cultural factors that shaped their decision-making process. The study involved five respondents, all of whom were current Chinese students studying in Thailand on a doctoral degree program. The participants were 4 males and 1 female that had been studying in Thailand for less than 1 year. These respondents were selected purposively to ensure they had direct and relevant experience regarding the research topic.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide covered key themes such as motivations to study in Thailand, the cost of living, the visa application process, teaching quality, the internationalization of Thai universities, and cultural adaptation challenges. Interviews were conducted in person. All interviews were audio-recorded for transcription and analysis.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview data. The data was transcribed and coded, with recurring themes identified based on the research questions. Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the purpose of the study and their rights. Participants were assured of confidentiality and were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

## **Results and Discussion**

In terms of personal factors, respondents generally agreed that the cost-effectiveness of studying in Thailand, its proximity to China, and the low English language requirement were the primary reasons for choosing to study there. Regarding financial factors, most (60%) respondents indicated that the cost of living met their expectations, although some (40%) experienced financial pressure. However, the overall situation was manageable. In terms of policy factors, although respondents accessed information about the visa process through

social platforms, they encountered practical difficulties, such as miscommunication. Most respondents (60%) acknowledged the degree of internationalization of Thai universities, but evaluations of teaching quality varied based on their prior research.

In terms of cultural factors, dietary issues were the most common difficulty in cultural adjustment, while religious factors had a minimal impact. Individual differences were evident. Some respondents (60%) chose to study in Thailand for economic reasons, the manageable cost of studying was also valued. Regarding finances, there was some stress, while some remained within their budget, they still felt some financial strain. Experiences with the visa process also differed; the procedures were found to be cumbersome and time-consuming. However, some students were able to expedite the process by paying for faster services.

In addition, some respondents (60%) rated the teaching quality at Thai universities as high and all respondents found that it suited their needs. In terms of cultural factors, some respondents (60%) could not accept Thai food and opted to cook for themselves or eat at Chinese restaurants while others adapted.

According to Lin (2014), most Chinese students choose to study in Thailand due to the low costs, its proximity to China, and the high level of internationalization. However, the visa process, differences in teaching quality, and cultural adjustment issues present difficulties for international students. Experiences of these factors vary, depending on students' financial conditions and their ability to adapt.

This study on the factors influencing Chinese students' decisions to study in Thailand highlights several areas where Thai universities, policymakers, and prospective students can improve. The findings suggest that while Thailand is an attractive destination due to its affordability and proximity, key challenges related to visa processes, teaching quality, and cultural adaptation need to be addressed.

Universities should invest in improving the clarity and efficiency of their admissions and visa application procedures for international students. Creating a streamlined, user-friendly online portal that provides comprehensive, up-to-date information could significantly reduce confusion and miscommunication. Offering dedicated, multilingual support staff for visa applications would also provide a valuable resource for students navigating the often-complex process.

To address varied perceptions of teaching quality, universities should promote their academic standards more effectively. Highlighting the credentials and expertise of faculty members, providing detailed course descriptions, and showcasing successful alumni could attract more students. Additionally, implementing quality assurance measures and regular feedback mechanisms for international students would help maintain high academic standards.

To ease cultural and social adaptation, universities should enhance their student support services. Providing orientation programs that cover not just academic but also practical aspects of life in Thailand, such as dietary adjustments and local customs, is crucial. Establishing mentorship programs that pair new students with more experienced peers or local students could offer a valuable support network. Partnering with local businesses, especially restaurants, to offer a wider variety of food options or providing on-campus cooking facilities would also help students adjust to local dietary habits.

Prospective students should conduct thorough research beyond a university's marketing materials. It's recommended that students seek out firsthand accounts from current or former students on social media platforms and forums. This can provide a more realistic picture of the academic environment and help manage expectations.

Financial planning is another critical aspect. While Thailand is generally affordable, students should create a detailed budget that accounts for both living and tuition costs. It's

also important to factor in potential unexpected expenses. Finally, students should be prepared for a period of cultural adjustment, particularly concerning food. Learning a few basic Thai phrases and showing a willingness to try local cuisine can significantly improve their experience and help them integrate into the local culture.

## Conclusion and Suggestions

Based on the interviewees' responses, the researcher concludes several key points. First, studying in Thailand offers a cost-effective option for students with limited budgets who still wish to pursue an international education. Second, studying abroad requires careful financial planning and an understanding of the visa application process. Third, adjustments to dietary habits can impact the quality of life, highlighting the importance of familiarizing oneself with the local culture beforehand.

This information holds significant practical value for prospective students planning to study in Thailand. By learning from the experiences of others, students can better understand the benefits and challenges of studying in Thailand, which will aid in making an informed decision about their destination. With proper preparation for visa applications and cultural adaptation, students can avoid the difficulties caused by misinformation. The insights gathered from these interviews offer both cognitive and practical guidance for future students, allowing them to enhance their study and life satisfaction and ensure a smoother study abroad experience.

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