

# Experiences of Overseas Chinese Graduate Students Studying in International Graduate Programs in a Selected Thai Public University

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**Abstract:** *This study reveals challenges international graduated students face and present what choices they choose in solving their difficulties. This study is a qualitative study applying Phenomenological research strategy. Ten Chinese international students were participants in this study. The participants were enrolled in an international graduate program in a Thai public university in the 2016 academic year. The participants were asked to discuss both living and learning experiences during their time in Thailand. Some of their problem solving techniques were also reviewed. This study followed the steps of data analysis proposed by Moustakas (1994). A qualitative data analysis software called “ATLAS.ti” was used as a data analysis tool in coding and categorising the obtained data. According to the findings, four learning difficulties regarding 1) understanding of English, 2) personal issues, 3) different education modes, and 4) academic problems were reported. Furthermore, the students uncovered three challenges in living in Thailand. These included 1) languages for communication, 2) culture differences, and 3) individual issues. In order to overcome the learning and living difficulties, three learning techniques– 1) getting help from other people, 2) obtaining information online, and 3) self-improvement were their solutions. Four adaptation techniques to ensure their living comfort were 1) getting some consultations from other people, 2) adapting themselves to the new culture, 3) making a self-improvement and expanding social acquaintances. It was the belief of Chinese students that they would enjoy their study more if the university could ensure that teachers apply more interesting teaching techniques in their teaching, offer some English and Thai training programs for living and learning, as well as using some learning motivation techniques.*

**Keywords:** Chinese international students, learning difficulties, coping with difficulties.

## Introduction

Nowadays, more and more Chinese students come to Thailand to continue their further education. However, many Chinese students do not always paint a beautiful picture in adapting themselves into their new living environment in Thailand. Some of these international students who could not cope with their new living environment and learning difficulties dropped out their study or even returned home. It was also reported that some were very suffering, experiencing both physical and emotional sickness and committed suicide (Suwannaset, 2010). While research in the past investigated the experiences of international students in Thailand, Lin and Kingminghae (2014) and Bin (2009) explored the life of Chinese undergraduate students. This study, therefore, focuses on investigating the

experiences of Chinese international graduate students enrolling in a Thai public university and techniques they apply to overcome the difficulties, and what kinds of necessary services or assistance that the university should provide to Chinese overseas students at the graduate level to enhance their living and learning conditions.

## Research questions

The research question of this study were:

1. What learning challenges are experienced by Chinese overseas graduate students studying in a selected Thai public university?
2. What are the living difficulties that Chinese overseas graduate students have encountered during their study in the selected public university?
3. What are the techniques that Chinese overseas graduate students have used to overcome the learning difficulties during their graduate studies in the selected public university?
4. What are techniques that Chinese overseas graduate students use to cope with their living difficulties in the selected public university?
5. What kind of assistance is needed from the university for Chinese international graduate students for learning and living in the selected public university?
6. What kind of assistances could help Chinese overseas graduate students to adapt to their new living environment?

## Literature Review

### Current Chinese students studying in Thailand

Since 2005, the number of International Programs offered by higher education institutions in Thailand has grown significantly from 520 programs to 981 programs. In 2010, both Thai public and private universities offered a total of 981 international programs both at undergraduate and graduate levels, i.e. 342 undergraduate programs; 389 master's degree programs; and 225 doctoral degree programs and 25 other degree programs. Foreign and Thai students can take courses for credits from such programs (Australian Education International, Australian Embassy, 2012). The Office of the Higher Education Commission in 2008 (as cited in Reungthai, 2012) pointed out that, "With the development of the higher education, the quality of Education in Thailand has been accepted by students from neighbor countries. Thai universities have been the center of an intercultural community among foreign students, especially Chinese" (p.1). According to The Office of the Higher Education Commission (2017),

*Thailand had 16,361 international students. The highest percentage of international students coming to study in Thailand was from Asia (86.92%), followed by North America (5.78%), and Europe (5.27%). China had the majority with 44.62%, followed by Laos 7.95% and Myanmar at 6.11%.*

On the other hand, Department of Chinese Education (2017) revealed that the Chinese Government encourages Chinese students to study in Thailand by providing a list of Thai public and private universities in total 89 universities, which offer recognized academic degrees.

### Challenges for overseas students

There are many adjustment problems that foreign students have to cope with such as language issues and culture difficulties. Pang and Barlas (1996) supported this claiming that

*“[Students] You may have problems with the language that make your studies more difficult. Culture differences also come into play and you will have to deal with the obvious feeling of being different, a stranger in a foreign land”* (p. 81).

Moreover, Lee (2014) described the experiences of overseas students that Since everything may seem completely different from what they are familiar with, students living and studying in another country could feel anxious, worried or frightened with everything they have never encountered before in their new learning environment. Wendorff (2013) supported this reporting 5 challenges that might be impede students studying abroad. These were 1. Feel like an outsider; 2. Language or cross cultural barriers; 3. Getting used to currency differences; 4. Having serious fear of missing out; and 5. Coping with cultural misunderstandings. From these viewpoints, it was recognized that the living challenges of study aboard are not only caused by external factors, but also from the students themselves.

### International students' adaption

Different countries have different cultures and teaching methods. In order to finish studying successfully, overseas students should adapt to the society and culture of the country in which they studied. When we talk about the life of international students, we also need to know what is adaptation? According to Pedersen, 1991; Sandhu, 1995; Sandhu and Asrabadi, 1998, (as cited in Sumer, 2009), there was the belief that, adaption of international students is influenced by the many challenges they face such as decline in their social and economic status, separation from their family and friends, lack of English proficiency, and isolation from their cultural backgrounds. Culture shock is an important part in adaption. Experiences in a new culture may result in culture shock – stress and conflict occurring when individuals come in contact with different cultures (Winkelman, 1994). It happens especially when individuals are totally immersed in the new culture, as is usually the case with international students. Oberg (1960) agreed this claiming that “culture shock involves such aspects as strain; a sense of loss and feelings of deprivation; being rejected or rejecting others; confusion, surprise, or anxiety; and a feeling of impotence... cultural shock is precipitated by anxiety that results from losing all familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (p.167). All the same, Winkelman (1994) identified culture shock as a normal part of being in a different cultural environment. He contended that individuals must first recognize they are in a state of culture shock, before the situation can be resolved. He described the phases of culture shock as follows: “1.the honeymoon or tourist phase;2. The crisis or cultural shock phase;3.The adjustment, reorientation, and gradual recovery phase;4.The adaptation, resolution, or acculturation phase”(Winkelman, 1994, p.122). However, based on Harzing (2016), “culture shock is the feeling of disorientation, loneliness, insecurity or confusion that can occur when someone leaves his or her home country to live in a new culture.

Socio-cultural adaptation is also the main point needed to know when doing this research”. Ward and Kennedy (1999) measured the sociocultural adaption of individuals in different cultures, “in terms of behavioral competence” and is “strongly influenced by factors underpinning culture learning and social skills acquisition”. Some key factors have

been identified as affecting sociocultural adaptation: gender, age, time in country, cultural distance, language fluency, and having a peer mentor or friendship family (Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2000; Pedersen, 2010; Seo & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005; Wang, 2009; Ward, Okura, Kennedy, & Kojima, 1998; Ward & Searle, 1991; Zhang & Rentz, 1996, as cited in Wilson, 2011). Dealing with these factors would be helpful to the international students' adaptation.

### **Difficulties concerning studies and living of overseas students in Thailand**

Many universities have already set up student affairs departments. Like, Leiden University (2016) in the Netherlands. Also, most of the universities in the USA have international student services, such as Tulsa University (2017), which can be seen as another interesting example that has an office of international student services which provides their overseas students with a variety of services. From this support, it can be found that, assistance or help from a university could encourage overseas students to overcome the difficulties and let them adapt to the cultural differences, and give them motivation to complete their academic goals.

### **Assistance for living and studying of international students**

When international students study abroad, they may face some living and study difficulties, such as, adapting to a new culture, language problems, financial problems, health problems, academic problems and other social problems. According to these problems, most of the universities will share a lot of useful information by handbooks or on the universities' websites, in order to help the new international students consider and prepare for living in a new environment. For example, Auckland University of Technology (2016) made a guide on their university's website which introduced useful information for their students in order to help their students adapt to the new environment. Many universities from different countries have student assistance services departments or students' unions, in order to seek to connect the local students or international students who are studying in their universities to find the students studying and living difficulties, according to the students' difficulties support with appropriate guidance, resources, and support to address a variety of personal and academic matters. Like, Texas A&M University (2012) has a Student Assistance Services, to help students solve their living and study problems

## **Research Design and Methodology**

This study involved a qualitative research approach applying phenomenological strategy. Ten full-time Chinese international graduate students studying in international graduate programs in a Thai public university for more than one year were asked to attend semi-structured interviews with the researchers in a quiet room at their university. The steps of data analysis proposed by Moustakas (1994) were used in analyzing the data obtained from informants. The 6 steps of data analysis used in this study were presented below:

- 1) Begin with a full description of the personal experiences of the participants concerning the phenomenon.
- 2) Develop a list of significant statements.
- 3) Group the significant statements into "meaningful units" or themes.
- 4) Write a textual description.
- 5) Write a structural description.

6) Write a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions.

### **Participants (Co-researchers)**

A purposive sampling technique was used so that the researchers had a list of criteria that could help the researchers to identify the most suitable participants. The researchers believed that the participants who could provide them with useful information should be Chinese International graduate students who were enrolled in one public university during the 2016 academic year. Their student status, additionally, was as full-time students of one international graduate program. They had spent at least one year studying in a selected Thai university.

### **Data instrument and data collection**

In this study, the researchers applied semi-structured interviews to obtain data from their key informants. According to the number of suitable participants suggested for a phenomenological study by Creswell in 2003, the researchers must not interview less than ten international students who met the above mentioned criteria. A name list of Chinese international students was requested from the department administration. To begin the step of data collection, the researchers needed to identify their first participant. This started by getting some opinions concerning potential students from the head of the department. The recommended students were, as a result, asked whether they were interested in joining this survey project. In addition, to identify informants who could be rich sources of information, the researchers also applied the snowball effect technique to link his participants from one to another. After identifying some participants willing to join this exploratory study, the researchers started contacting them and asking for a convenient time to meet and have a conversation regarding their overseas experiences. To have a smooth conversation, the researchers chose to see their participants in a quiet room at their university. The reason that the university was the best place to interview them is because the researchers viewed that a good interview should take place in a location where their informants can feel relaxed. The ideal place should be a place which has an atmosphere where they can easily recall, allowing them to respond well to questions asked by the researchers. Before the interview, the researchers explained to his informants about the purposes of this research project and asked for their permission to record the conversation for the benefit of data analysis. The researchers discontinued collecting data after the data was saturated finding out that there was no new information emerging from interviewing new participants.

### **Data analysis**

To analyze the data obtained from interviewees, the researchers transcribed the recorded audio files into text or document files. After all text files were created, the researchers started identifying possible themes according to steps of data analysis called modification of the STEVICK-COLAIZZI-KEEN Method of Phenomenological Data proposed by Moustakas in 1994.

## Description and discussion of findings

The participants in this study have lived in Thailand from 2 to 6 years. Most of them were between 27 to 30 years old (60%), and 23 or 24 years old (40%). About 6 people or 60%, have lived in Thailand for more than 6 years, while 4 of them (40%) were new students coming to study for their Master's degree in Thailand. 6 of them (60%) graduated with their Bachelor degree from a Thai university.

### Four kinds of learning difficulties:

1. Language problems, which includes communication in class and doing homework. A few students can speak English but are unable to understand the accented spoken English of their lecturers.
2. Personal problems and certain habits included working hard for earning money which left them too tired to study, being addicted to computer games, and lacking self-discipline. Other students, who do not have good English skills, do not feel comfortable enough to meet and have a consultation with their teachers.
3. Studying in different education modes in the Thai educational system which they were not familiar with becomes one of their learning challenges.
4. Lacking background of knowledge of the subject matter they were studying, as well as having limitation of vocabulary in the study field and work experience. Misunderstanding the homework requirements, and lacking of paper writing experience impede their studying and completing their final research project.

### Five kinds of living problems:

1. Knowing little Thai is the major communication problem which impedes Chinese students living in Thailand and making friends with Thai people.
2. Lack of knowledge of Thai culture, customs and Language cognition causes Chinese international students to feel like outsiders and also results in misunderstandings.
3. Some Chinese students do not like Thai food and they feel uncomfortable living in the hot tropical country.
4. Many Chinese students living abroad for a long time feel homesick, lonely and tired of maintaining friendships.
5. Some Chinese students lacked self-care ability which caused difficulties in daily life, and some were facing financial problems.

### Three kinds of techniques to cope with the learning difficulties.

1. Chinese students looked for classmates', friends' and teachers' help.
2. They have used the internet to help translate meanings of their unknown vocabulary.
3. Most Chinese students study English in order to communicate with their teachers well, and it also helped in class and doing homework.

### Four kinds of techniques to cope with living difficulties:

1. When they faced difficulties, Chinese students would ask for help from the university and friends, and use a translator or body language to communicate with Thai people.
2. Chinese students study Thai language and culture to adapt to living in Thailand.
3. Self-improvement to solve their individual issues.
4. Developing their interpersonal skills to make new friends with Chinese and Thais.

### **Three kinds of assistance were needed from the university when Chinese students were learning and living in Thailand.**

1. The students hope the university can update teaching methods and teaching equipment for learning. Such as, the teaching methods need to be more useful for their future careers and better teaching techniques could help the students better understand the lessons, and also, the students hope that advanced teaching equipment can increase the learning content;
2. Chinese students hope that the university can provide an English and Thai Training Program, in order to solve the language problem of living and learning in Thailand;
3. Chinese students expect to get more concern about their living and learning from their university, and also they expect to have more chances to get scholarships or financial aid, and more activities in order to increase the learning motivation and expand the scope of communication.

### **Two kinds of assistance could help them to adapt to the new living environment.**

1. Thai language and Thai culture learning assistance would help them adapt to living in Thailand;
2. More international students living and learning service could help them to better adapt to the new living environment.

## **Conclusion and suggestions**

This research was conducted with qualitative research. The purpose of this study was to better understand what experiences Chinese international graduate students have faced, and the strategies they used to overcome the difficulties. More important is to give voice to the Chinese students, and assist Thai universities to be able to recognize the challenges and necessary assistance required by Chinese International students in Thailand.

Some suggestions based on findings in this study are presented as follows:

- For the government, this study could make some suggestions that both the Chinese government and Thai government should create some websites and publish some international student handbooks, in order to provide some suggestions before the Chinese overseas students go or come to study in Thai universities, so that the international students will know better what they should be prepared for.
- For Thai university, Thai universities should establish and consummate the quality of university websites, in order to assist the international students to know the pre-arrival information, like providing advice on how to adjust their life to the Thai environment and find personal support on practical matters of everyday life. And also, the international students could get help from the universities through the website, such as, admission, information to obtain visa extensions, academic concerns, housing problems, and so on. On the other hand, the Thai universities should build an International Student Center, not only to assist the international students' daily life in Thailand, but also to provide the international students a place for activities to expand their social circle.
- For the heads of departments, based on the findings, most of the Chinese international students lack Thai (living difficulties) and English (learning difficulties) skills that caused the students difficulties to adapt to the new environment of living and learning. In this case, the researchers suggest that, the faculty should provide Thai and English courses for the international students, after

they attend the program. And appropriately raise the admission standards for some students who wish to attend classes but lack the English skills, the department could send them to English training class first, and Thai language and culture class should be a compulsory course in the program.

- Chinese international students expecting to get more concern about their living and learning from their department, and some of them hope they can get more time to communicate with their lecturers and office members in order to know each other better, and remove uncomfortable feelings. So, the researchers suggest the department should set up more activities in the first semester.
- For incoming Chinese students, the researchers make the following suggestions. First, they need to study Thai culture and try to learn Thai, by taking a Thai language course or study by themselves. Second, develop independent living and learning skills, and the courage to deal with the difficulties. Last, keep a positive attitude to face everyday challenges when living in Thailand.

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