Exploring Chinese Students' Lived Intercultural Experiences Studying Abroad in Thailand through a Narrative Inquiry with a Collage Self-Portrait Method

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ABSTRACT

Most study abroad research has predominantly investigated international students studying in Western Anglophone countries, where English is the native language. However, this study shifted the context of study abroad research by exploring Chinese students' experiences studying abroad in Thailand, a unique context where English is regarded as a foreign language and has no colonial history. Utilizing lived intercultural experiences as an analytical lens, we employed a narrative inquiry design with a collage self-portrait method, a type of arts-based qualitative data elicitation, to capture the complex, multimodal, and creative nature of the lived intercultural experiences. Combining the theme-weaving technique and the coding method revealed that Chinese students studying abroad in Thailand reported experiencing academic adaptation between different cultures, embodying

fluid translanguaging use, and undergoing complex emotions of living between cultures. These experiences are central to Chinese students' adjustments to a new academic and living environment, which international programs in Thailand must consider when offering myriad kinds of support for Chinese students or other international students coming to study in Thailand.

Keywords: study abroad, lived intercultural experiences, Chinese students

Introduction

Study abroad experience has received tremendous attention from many researchers because the number of international students traveling to other countries for educational purposes has increased exponentially (OECD, 2023). According to UNESCO (2019), there were over 5.3 million international students in 2017 worldwide. This number has increased by two million since 2000. Out of these international students, Chinese students comprised a massive proportion of international students. According to the Chinese Ministry of Education (2019), approximately 1.6 million students chose to study abroad in other countries. The impetus that drives Chinese students to study overseas is their expectation of improving their English proficiencies. Although the Chinese government tries to promote the learning and teaching of languages other than English in China, Chinese people still believe that English has a high status globally. In some urban cities, English is even more important than Chinese (Song & Xia, 2020). Chinese people believe that immersing in the target language and culture benefits language ability and increases employability (Huang & Turner, 2018).

For many Chinese students, studying abroad means studying in Western Anglophone countries, such as the UK, USA, Canada, Ireland, and Canada (Baker & Fang, 2021; Bui, 2021; Fang & Baker, 2018; Jenkins, 2014; Li, 2024; Quan et al., 2016; Ye, 2018). Until recently, Thailand has been reported as one of the favorable destinations for Chinese students (Li, 2017; Yin et al., 2015). Previous studies have revealed that Chinese students decided to study in Thai universities because the Chinese government accepted the conferred degrees (Yin et al., 2015), flexible teaching methods, comprehensive language support (e.g., interpreters), and opportunities to learn the Thai language (Siricharoen, 2023). However, some Chinese students chose Thailand because many Thai universities offer English medium instruction (EMI) programs, but they require lower internationalized English proficiency test scores for admission compared to those in the Anglophone

settings (Anne, 2013). This study focused on these Chinese students who chose to learn English in Thailand even though the status of English in Thailand is English as a foreign language (EFL), which can be defined as English not being the country's official language.

Previous research on Chinese students' study abroad in Thailand has primarily focused on their decisions to enroll in Thai universities (e.g., Siricharoen, 2023; Yin et al., 2015). This line of inquiry is applaudable since it uncovered why Chinese students chose Thailand to advance their educational opportunities. However, limited research has explored their experiences while studying abroad in Thailand. As a result, situating in the context of the study abroad research, we used *lived intercultural experiences* as an analytical lens to understand Chinese students studying abroad in Thailand and to explore how they resolve tensions of cultural differences to adjust themselves to an academic and living environment where the status of English is EFL, which has no direct link to colonial history. The research question that guided the pursuit of knowledge in this study was: *What are lived intercultural experiences narrated by Chinese students studying English in Thailand?* We hope the knowledge from this study benefits international programs in Thailand and beyond in designing preparation courses for Chinese students to ease their transition into international programs and lecturers to design pedagogy facilitative to international students' learning during their study abroad experiences.

Literature Review

Study abroad research is closely linked to intercultural experiences (Baker et al., 2022; Boonsuk & Fang, 2023; Peck & Yates, 2019; Song & Xia, 2020). Previous research found that most Chinese students had high expectations about learning English while studying abroad (Fang & Baker, 2018; Jessica & Allison, 2014; Sung, 2022). Previous studies have also reported that their shared goal of studying abroad was to improve English proficiencies (Fang & Baker, 2018). Textor (2024) reported that the USA and the UK were the most popular destinations for Chinese students because English-speaking countries could provide a conducive environment for learning English. Most Chinese students want high English proficiency because of competition in the job market (Wilkins et al., 2013; Ye, 2018). Therefore, it can be said that more and more Chinese students consider high proficiency in English as a goal during study abroad experiences.

Many studies on intercultural experiences have connected with the psychological aspects of learning (Cooper, 2007; Dunne, 2017; Mitchell & Paras, 2018; Schroder, 2020). Cultural differences lead to psychological problems while studying in other countries. Those studies often explore learners' cognitive processes, including attitudes, values, behaviors, and

beliefs, to explain positive and negative intercultural experiences. Those studies highlighted that cultural differences make individuals access uncomfortable zones, and encountering diversity affects their perception and value. Festinger (1957) defined cognitive dissonance as when prior beliefs contradict a new situation. Those uncomfortable feelings could make people change their attitudes and beliefs (Cooper, 2007).

Prior research on study abroad experiences has explored international students' intercultural experiences in non-English speaking countries because those countries have diverse languages and cultures (Chaiyasat, 2024; Kim, 2019; Peck & Yates, 2019; Qian, 2018). According to Andrade et al. (2019), intercultural experience means international students develop their understanding of communication with others in different cultures and language environments. Research on intercultural experiences provides further thinking about diverse English and culture and challenges the notion of native English speakers (Wang & Jenkins, 2016). Students' multilingual linguistic repertoire could be further explored by researchers to explore English learning in such a context. Jenkins (2014) argued that international students from multilingual and multicultural backgrounds have multiple language needs. Therefore, international students from a multilingual context could accept diversity better than those from a native context. Moreover, exploring intercultural experiences could make English learners doubt the practicability of native norms when studying in a non-English speaking context where new language and culture come into their daily lives.

Study abroad research focusing on intercultural experiences found that Chinese students have problems with the target language and culture (Holmes, 2004; Tsang, 2001). Henze and Zhu (2012) stated that Chinese students studying in non-English speaking countries did not master the second language but have difficulty when interacting in the classroom environment. Before Chinese students plan to go to other countries, monolingual language background and exam-oriented make them believe in native English (Pan, 2015). When Chinese students interact with local people, language diversity and cultural differences make it difficult to adjust to different teaching and learning in the target cultures (Byron & Pack, 1992). Besides, the learning culture in the study abroad context is different from that of the Chinese learning culture, such as teacher-centralized and passive learning styles (Chan, 1999), which may cause Chinese students to be less interested in communicating with others (Heng, 2020).

Most study-abroad research has emphasized the importance of adjustment (Benson et al., 2018; Chaiyasat, 2024; Huang, 2020; Hamid & Islam, 2013; Quan et al., 2016; Rhein & Jones, 2020; Tsang, 2001). Prior research has found that language barriers, including academic and social interaction, are the most pressing concerns for international students (Kimura,

2016; Rhein, 2018). Many international students acknowledged that they want to learn native English when studying in Thailand because many English programs have opened in Thai higher education (Kuo & Wong, 2019; Mounier & Tangchuang, 2010). However, the reality is that international students are challenged to socialize with local people. Specifically, for Chinese students, Ma (2016) found that Chinese students have difficulties in daily life, academics, and communication while studying in Thailand. Therefore, language use is still a big problem among Chinese students. According to Zhu (2013), Chinese students experience "culture shock" that could make it difficult for them in Thailand. Culture shock includes unfamiliarity with the language and culture. Different languages and learning cultures could make them feel like outsiders in Thailand.

Methodology

Conceptualizing lived intercultural experiences as stories to live by (Dunne, 2017), a narrative inquiry was used as a methodological frame to guide the data collection and data analysis. Clandinin and Connelly (2006) claimed that "people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories by those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (p.2). Guided by the narrative inquiry design, we explored the meanings that Chinese students described their experiences studying abroad in Thailand. Polkinghorne (1998) stated that "narrative is the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful" (p.1). Their stories are "not mirrors of experience; they are constructed by the researchers with certain intentions in mind" (Lampert, 2000, p. 68). Based on this argument, this study acknowledges that lived intercultural experiences revealed in this study are *co-constructed meanings* as performed by the researcher and the participants (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). Since lived intercultural experiences are considered as "continuity of experience" (Dewey, 1938, p. 56), this study explored learners' *past* experiences, *present* moments of lives, and perspectives about *the future.*

It is observed that narrative inquiry traditions prioritize stories, narrated in social contexts, over other modes of experiences; however, lived intercultural experiences are complex, multimodal, and strongly related to creativity (Dunne, 2017). Thus, an arts-based qualitative method was implemented to complement the limitations of a narrative inquiry (Greenwood, 2019). Prabjandee and Nilpirom (2022) defined arts-based qualitative research as when "the researchers decided to use a particular form of arts to explore issues about human experiences" (p. 252). Arts entail an electric array of products, such as photos, poetry, or fiction (Greenwood, 2019). In this study, we used a collage self-portrait method, a type of

multimodal art (Prabjandee & Nilpirom, 2022), to capture the richness and dimensionality of lived intercultural experiences studying English in Thailand.

Context of the Study and Participants

This study was conducted at a university in eastern Thailand. According to the university's statistics (2023), the university enrolled approximately 463 international students from many countries. Of these, 347 students (approximately 75%) are Chinese. However, out of these 347 Chinese students, only 22 study international programs, while the rest are enrolled in Thai programs. To obtain the participants, the narrative inquirer is interested in the participants with stories to tell (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). Thus, we used a volunteer sampling technique to ensure the appropriateness of the participant selection. To elaborate, we started by contacting all 22 Chinese students through the Chinese student association at this university from the extant WeChat group. We sent a recruiting advertisement to WeChat, explaining the purposes of the study and a brief research protocol.

Five students volunteered to join this research project. With limited space, we decided to present only two Chinese students, *Miguel* and *Janis* (pseudonyms created by the participants), because the length of study in Thailand was different (four months and five years), and they have different background experiences. These differences allow precise comparisons to generate insights into Chinese students' lived intercultural experiences. Miguel and Janis are unique in their background experiences. Miguel is 34 years old, while Janis is only 19. Miguel is pursuing a Ph.D. in ELT, but Janis is studying for a bachelor's degree in international business management. Miguel studied in Thailand for four months, while Janis stayed here for five years. These unique experiences were found helpful in interpreting the lived intercultural experiences of Chinese students studying abroad in Thailand.

Data Collection

In this study, the first author is the primary investigator, whereas the second and the third authors are her research advisers. Guided by narrative inquiry and an arts-based qualitative research method (Butler-Kisber, 2018), this study used collage self-portraits as the main instrument to elicit Chinese students' stories of lived intercultural experiences and semi-structured interviews to supplement the data. Collage self-portrait was used to capture the complexity of feelings, beliefs, and special events when learning English in China and Thailand. This instantaneous creativity touched the participants' minds and triggered their memories of learning experiences. Collage self-portrait is a visual method to collect the data that words cannot express their

voice (Gauntlett, 2007). Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010) claimed that collage in qualitative research "is a reflective process, as a form of elicitation, and as a way of conceptualizing ideas" (p.3).

The participants were asked to create two visual representations of their experiences; one represents learning experiences in China, and the other represents learning experiences in Thailand. The first author prepared A4 paper, permanent markers, glue, magazines, cards, and wrapping paper to facilitate the creation of a collage self-portrait. The collage self-portrait representing learning in China was created first. The first author posted a question for the participants: What were your experiences like when learning English in China? The participants then made a collage self-portrait to answer the question. Creating a collage may be intimidating, so during the creation time, the first author also created her collage self-portrait to reduce the participant's anxiety and simultaneously build relationships with them. The informal conversation while creating collage self-portraits was also recorded to supplement the data. After the participants had completed the collage self-portrait, they were asked to describe how the collage represented their experiences. Two weeks later, after completing the preliminary analysis of the first collage, the exact process was conducted to elicit the participants' learning experiences in Thailand. It took approximately 20-40 minutes to complete each collage self-portrait.

Apart from collage self-portraits, open-ended conversational-styled interviews were used to supplement the data. The participants were interviewed about their everyday experiences inside and outside the classrooms. Examples of the interview questions were: What were your experiences like when communicating with Thai teachers, classmates, and the locals? What were the most challenging things for you when living in Thailand? What suggestions would you give to new Chinese of learning English in Thailand? After each interview, the first author wrote analytic memos focusing on meanings described by each participant. The first author wrote sudden thoughts or questions that could be further explored from the data. According to Clarke (2005), memos are "sites of conversation with us about our data" (p 202). It took approximately 40 – 60 minutes to complete the interviews.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The data in this study were qualitative, so an inductive approach was used to analyze the data. Collage self-portrait, which was analyzed using the theme-weaving technique (Lahman et al., 2021). The theme-weaving technique could explore participants' thoughts significantly from their artwork. Davis (2003) stated that "the weaving together of the parts of the

whole exemplifies the ongoing portraiture dialectic between process and product" (p. 215). We compared the two collages in China and Thailand for each participant. Theme-weaving helped us to discover the themes that words cannot be found in semi-structured interviews. For semi-structured interviews, the first author transcribed the interviews. We used the coding method to analyze the interview data (Saldaña, 2009). First, open coding was used to generate initial codes by assigning meanings to the transcript. Second, axial coding was used to combine codes into categories. Last, selective coding was applied to combine categories into themes to answer the research questions. To enhance trustworthiness, we employed the member check technique by sending the narratives to the participants to check.

Findings

Following the narrative inquiry traditions (Barkhuizen et al., 2014), this section presents the findings based on individual stories. It begins with Miguel's narrative, whose stories represent a Chinese student studying abroad in Thailand for a short period (four months). After that, Janis's narrative is presented to describe a Chinese student studying abroad in Thailand for a more extended period (five years). Even though individual narratives are represented, the stories contain similar narrative structures, yielding similar trajectories of lived intercultural experiences studying abroad in Thailand between the two participants. The stories reflect the experiences, which are thematized as academic adaptation between different cultures, the embodiment of fluid translanguaging use, and undergoing complex emotions of living between cultures. Unlike traditional qualitative research representation, the themes are illustrated through detailed stories rather than described explicitly.

Miguel's Narrative

Before coming to Thailand to pursue a postgraduate degree in ELT, Miguel was an English-majored student studying at a low-ranked reputation university in China. She felt her teachers did not pay much attention to her future, which caused her to fail the Test for English Major (TEM-8).

> I failed the TEM-8 test. Other high-ranking universities required English-majored students to pass TEM-8 for graduation, but our university did not have this requirement, so students and teachers ignored preparing us to take the test. Since I failed the TEM-8 test, finding a teaching job was difficult because teachers or employers would provide more chances for students who passed TEM-8, but not me.

Back in China, she was confused about why she needed to remember many things in the English classrooms. Teachers at her university taught intensive listening, reading, and writing skills but ignored improving her speaking skills. Teachers told her to prepare for the TEM-8 test, an essential requirement for English-majored students. The university emphasized this test in all classes, even in the American and British literature classes. Because of test-driven pedagogy, Miguel reported never being prepared to speak English because the TEM-8 test has no such requirements.

When learning English in China, she felt exhausted and under pressure most of the time. She spent much of her time preparing for the TEM-8 test. She felt like a machine; passing the TEM-8 test meant she was a qualified product.

Figure 1

Miguel's English Learning Experience in China
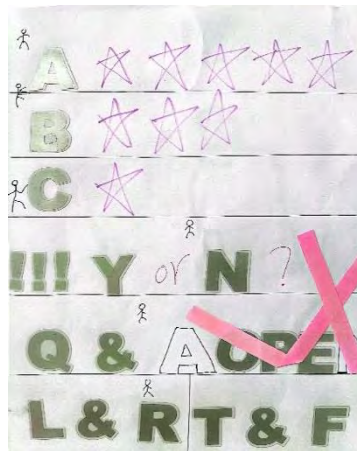
Miguel's collage self-portrait represents her English learning experiences in China as test-driven. The test required her to answer the questions true or false, yes or no, and choose A, B, C, or D. There are no open questions in the test. Also, she wanted to reach an A level to be a qualified student.

Failing the TEM-8 test drove Miguel to study the Thai language for her master's degree. It was during this time that she came to Thailand for an exchange program in a famous northern province of Thailand, which tourists worldwide visited. Because she was not proficient in Thai, she used English to communicate with classmates and foreigners outside of the classrooms. She realized she had adequate English proficiency when using it in real life.

> I realized that my English was good enough compared to my classmates with a non-English majored background. I felt confident speaking English with foreigners; I could communicate with people from different backgrounds, not only Thai. It was the first time that I thought my English was good. I did not regret being an English major.

Gaining more confidence through real-life English use, Miguel decided to pursue a Ph.D. in Thailand. Although she had previously experienced studying abroad in Thailand in the exchange program, she felt she could not easily fit into this Ph.D. international program. The English-only environment made her lose confidence in her English proficiency again. She found that her classmates, who came from different countries, spoke English in the classroom more fluently than her. She was afraid to talk in the classroom most of the time. Upon asking what it was like studying in an international program in Thailand, Miguel responded immediately:

> I felt different from the Chinese classroom. I could meet other people but only speak English to them. I speak English all the time during class. The challenge of studying in Thailand was listening, speaking, and writing. I still need more time to use English.

She could not follow teachers' instructions or complete the assignment herself. Back in China, she was trained to pass the test. When the teachers in Thailand asked her to write papers to explain her views on scholarly topics, she could not write a word. She reported she could not submit her assignment on time because she did not know what to write. She discovered that English proficiency could affect her academic learning. She decided to improve her English proficiency by using traditional Chinese ways, such as memorizing vocabulary, learning grammar, and listening to native speakers' videos and blogs. After three months, she could understand teachers' instructions and rebuilt her confidence to answer the questions and communicate with her classmates. Miguel reported that teachers and classmates' encouragement and embracement gave her confidence in academic learning. People did not give her negative comments when speaking English but encouraged her to talk more. There were no right or wrong answers, so she did not worry about her response. Even outside the campus, people did not judge her pronunciation.

Thanks to her Thai language learning experience before she came to Thailand, she used English and the Thai language to expand her social life. Using her language resources, pictures, and applications made her life comfortable in Thailand.

However, Miguel felt she had complex feelings when studying in Thailand. She gained more confidence in speaking English, but she felt disappointed because the university environment gave her fewer opportunities to speak English. Also, when teachers assigned her to complete assignments, she felt nervous (See Figure 2).

> I try to talk to people in English, and I would be glad if they could talk to me in English. However, local people did not speak English with me. When they knew I could speak Thai, they talked to me in Thai, not English.

Figure 2

Miguel's English Learning Experience in Thailand

As illustrated in the collage self-portrait, Miguel thought of herself like a tree when describing her learning experience in Thailand. Teachers' and classmates' encouragement and embracement made her grow. The leaves represented the many unknown things she needed to explore. She was not trained to answer yes or no questions when studying in Thailand. Instead, she had to answer the What? Why? How? When? Where? She felt that she had to develop critical thinking. The colorful ribbon represents her need to extend her knowledge and engage in countless professional development. In the last interview, she was delighted to study in Thailand and assured herself that a bright future would come after graduation. She liked to study here because there was less pressure. She said she would develop her career in Thailand for a while but return to China in the future.

Janis' Narrative

Unlike Miguel, who had studied in Thailand for four months, Janis came to Thailand at a young age. Thus, she only remembered learning English in China during junior school in a rural area. She remembers vividly her Chinese English teachers because they were very strict, and she was afraid of them.

Figure 3

Janis's English Learning Experience in China

Janis created her collage self-portrait to represent an event of studying English in the classroom. The classroom was always quiet, and teachers could punish students who did not follow the instructions using a stick. She wanted to avoid learning English in this environment because it put pressure on her, especially when taking the exams at the end of the semester. The low score made her give up on learning English. She sat quietly in the classroom and followed the teachers' instructions.

> The classes were serious, strict, and quiet, and I simply followed the teachers' instructions. Teachers were powerful. I was depressed because my English score was too low.

She felt overwhelmed during her studies in China and was depressed when learning English in such an environment. Teachers told her to memorize vocabulary and sentences in exams; only this way could she improve her score, which confused her, and she hated learning English. However, she had friends who made her happy, and teachers who shared the same culture with her made her understand the instruction.

> I felt happy because I had many close friends and family here and could understand what the teacher said. I felt anxious when I took the exam because I worried about my score. I was also confused about why the teacher taught us to memorize vocabulary and writing. I did not like this way of learning English.

Studying in Thailand was like a nightmare because she did not want to leave her home for a strange place at such a young age. She felt hopeless about studying in China and angry that her parents did not consult with her to make this decision. She was terrified of this unknown place and only spoke Chinese. She narrated, "I did not want to learn in Thailand because my parents did not discuss this with me. They just told me I needed to learn in Thailand without discussion."

Unlike Miguel, Janis took almost four years to adapt to the Thai context. Before studying in Thailand, she did not know English or Thai, and the language problems made her want to return to China. She could not understand anything in the classroom.

> I refused to learn English and Thai when I first arrived in Thailand because this could make my parents change their minds and let me return to China. When I heard studying English and Thai, I wanted to return to China. Why must I learn here?

Her parents found a Chinese high school in Thailand, where many Chinese students study, and some Chinese teachers teach certain subjects. She was involved in this school quickly and made many Chinese friends. She thought this high school was just like studying in China. However, she felt the English class differed from China, and there were no tests for her to worry about. Besides, the native English-speaking teachers taught her fun activities that made her like to take English classes.

> Unlike studying in China, my high school emphasized activities rather than test practicing. I did not focus on grammar learning but on speaking in the classroom.

After high school, Janis enrolled at an international college, majoring in International Business Management (IBM). At that time, she felt panicked because she had to deliver many presentations. Teachers wanted to show what she learned from the topic rather than how to prepare for the exam. Most importantly, there was no right or wrong, but she shared what she learned through the presentation. She was afraid of speaking in public due to her fear of teachers in China, which made her perform poorly in the

classroom. She did not want to learn, so she sat in the corner every time, which made her invisible.

However, teachers' and classmates' encouragement made her conquer this problem. Her roommates helped her learn Thai significantly and listened to her patiently.

Figure 4

Janis's English Learning Experience in Thailand

Janis created this collage self-portrait to represent a critical moment when she could speak in public without fear. In her second year, she made a presentation without being nervous. When she stood before her classmates and teachers, the students encouraged her, and the teacher said she did a good job. At that time, she built confidence in her ability to use English.

> I accepted the offer of staying in Thailand after I had gone to this university because my classmates, especially my roommates, were friendly to me. They understood that my Thai was poor, so they were patient with me when I spoke Thai. When we had misunderstandings, we used English to communicate.

However, Janis still felt anxious about academic learning in her second year because she misunderstood what the teacher said and lots of professional vocabulary she did not know. Also, the paperwork made her anxious. She did not know how to write.

> I still could not fit into university life in Thailand. I was not satisfied with my English because my English could not support my professional learning and interaction in my major.

When she learned the Thai language with her roommates' help, in the beginning, she used English more than Thai and used a translation application to learn Thai. After she learned more Thai vocabulary, she could speak Thai most of the time, but English was a vital language when interacting with people. She realized that using her language resources could enrich her social life. She used English when Thai was not working during communication. Especially since she needed to improve her Thai writing, English became an essential tool for communication through writing. Her ability to speak Thai has made her many Chinese friends. She was happy to help them solve problems.

> Many Chinese students asked me for help. I love helping them because I understand that language makes those students suffer greatly. I remember I helped a student at the hospital. I did not know Thai in this area, so we used English and Thai.

In the last interview, she said she did not regret studying in Thailand and gradually loved this place because she could make many Chinese friends. Also, she plans to study English to promote her self-development and prepare her learning for her master's study.

Discussion and Implications

Departing from extant study abroad research exploring Chinese students studying abroad in Western Anglophone countries (Bui, 2021; Li, 2024; Quan et al., 2016; Ye, 2018), this study explored Chinese students studying abroad in Thailand, where English is a foreign language and has no direct link to colonial history. Utilizing lived intercultural experiences as an analytical lens (Dunne, 2017), we found that the two Chinese students in this study experienced academic adaptation between different cultures (Chinese and Thai), embodied fluid translanguaging use, and underwent complex emotions of living between cultures. These lived intercultural experiences resulted from their entrenched expectations of studying abroad, which were to become advanced English users and gain a privileged position in the competitive job market. Miguel studied in an English program in Thailand because she wanted to improve her English ability for self-development and become competitive in the job market in the future. Janis thought English became important since studying at a university; she thought English proficiency related to academic learning, and only improving her English proficiency could help her academic learning be successful and her dream to study abroad in a native-speaking country. These findings are consistent with similar research on Chinese international students pursuing high English

proficiency when studying abroad in other contexts (Sung, 2022; Wilkins et al., 2013).

When expectations and reality were not constructively aligned, Chinese students displayed complex emotions about living between cultures. The finding is consistent with previous studies (Chaiyasat, 2024; Peck & Yates, 2019). The findings highlighted the theoretical concept of cognitive dissonance in existing intercultural experience studies (Cooper, 2007; Mitchell & Paras, 2018). Previous scholars stated that cognitive dissonance happens when an individual's beliefs or past experiences are mismatched with the new environment. Cultural differences are related to cognitive dissonance because culture is a broad conception that includes beliefs and the community environment. To reduce cognitive dissonance, one needs to change the individual's attitudes, values, or beliefs (Cooper, 2007). Miguel challenged her academic learning because she learned English with a test-oriented ideology in China, and this belief mismatched the new learning environment. Miguel's cognitive dissonance happened, and she changed the learning to interact with the teacher often and develop critical thinking to fit in this learning environment. Janis initially resisted studying in Thailand because of the language barrier; speaking Chinese and having low English ability could not fit in the Thai context. After studying at university, she changed her attitude to learning English and Thai. She conquered the fear of speaking to the public by participating in many presentations and being encouraged by people. A change in attitude made her reduce the cognitive dissonances and adapt to the Thai context.

Comparing the findings of this study with extant research conducted in the Thai context (e.g., Kimura, 2016; Rhein, 2018; Rhein & Jones, 2020), Chinese students in this study have similar problems with academic learning and social interaction while studying in Thailand. Janis had difficulty in social interaction due to a lack of language ability. Also, she challenged her academic learning due to low English proficiency. The language barrier made her adapt to Thailand for a long time. Miguel could speak English and Thai language, but she could not fit into the classroom environment due to the different learning styles in China. For social interaction, she could use her language ability to communicate efficiently. However, their deficiency in Thai writing caused her to spend time involved in the Thai context. While this finding is not entirely surprising, it highlights the challenges these two Chinese students experienced while studying abroad in Thailand.

The findings in this study offer practical implications for international programs in Thailand. The international programs need to be sensitive to international students' expectations, such as those of Chinese students, to improve their English proficiencies during their study abroad in Thailand. The programs may turn these expectations into offering preparation

programs for Chinese students to ease their transition into a new academic learning culture. Since the participants had limited English proficiencies when they enrolled in the international program in Thailand, the preparation programs could target preparing academic English for international students and emphasize the affordances of studying abroad in Thailand, in which students can embody fluid translanguaging uses. Lecturers in international programs should also be aware that international students (e.g., Chinese students in this study) might enroll in their classes with limited English proficiencies, and they bring with them an entrenched cultural identity into the classes, so they need to provide myriad ways of support to scaffold their comprehension. Every aspect of pedagogy (e.g., instruction, materials, and assessments) should receive careful attention when teaching these international students.

The interpretation of this study should be conducted with caution. It is not our intention to claim that every Chinese student studying abroad in Thailand goes through the same trajectory as Miguel and Janis. Future research can conduct longitudinal research following international students from the time they are enrolled until they graduate to understand the trajectory of their broad experience in the study. This line of inquiry is largely ignored and should receive greater attention in study-abroad research.

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