

# Motivations, Experiences, and Guanxi: A Qualitative Study of Chinese Undergraduate Students in Northern Thailand

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Received: May 6, 2025; Revised: December 23, 2025; Accepted: December 30, 2025

## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to understand the direct experiences of Chinese undergraduate students at a university in Northern Thailand and explore the factors, particularly social influences, shaping their decision to study there. Employing a qualitative design, data were collected through a focus group with 11 students and semi-structured interviews with 3 recruitment agents in China for triangulation, followed by thematic analysis. Findings revealed a complex interplay of motivations: students often made independent decisions, viewing Thai education as a “steppingstone” over domestic competition (*Gaokao*) to broader further education opportunities, while strong social network influences (*Guanxi*) were also highly prevalent. Positive tourism experiences contributed to the decision-making, while cost factors were primarily highlighted by agents. Student experiences were mixed, characterized by appreciation for the relaxed social environment and friendly interactions (“honeymoon” phase), alongside significant frustrations regarding perceived lack of academic rigor and group work challenges (“disillusionment” phase). Agents identified major recruitment challenges including safety concerns amplified by media, economic pressures in China diminishing perceived degree value, market saturation, and the critical shift towards peer influence via social media (e.g., Douyin, Xiaohongshu). The study highlighted the importance of social networks, managing academic expectations, and authentic communication strategies for Thai institutions recruiting Chinese students, contributing practical insights into contemporary student mobility and adaptation.

**KEYWORDS:** Chinese students, Higher Education, Motivations, Student experience, Guanxi, Cross-cultural adaptation, Social media.

## Introduction

International student mobility is a significant global phenomenon, with China being one of the largest source countries for students seeking higher

education abroad (Hattersley & Nicholson, 2024). For decades, Southeast Asian nations, particularly Thailand, have emerged as increasingly attractive destinations for Chinese

students (Songsathaphorn et al., 2014). Thailand offers geographical proximity, cultural connections, and relatively affordable education compared to traditional Western destinations. Understanding the motivations, decision-making processes, and experiences of this growing student population within Thai universities is crucial for host institutions and for broader research on international education trends. While factors like cost and proximity are often cited (Chaiyasat, 2020; Chen et al., 2018; Kang et al., 2019; Songsathaphorn et al., 2014), there is a need for deeper, qualitative understanding of the nuanced reasons why Chinese students choose Thailand for their higher education. Existing research may not fully capture the complex interplay of personal aspirations, family ties and social network influences (such as *Guanxi*), and the specific academic and social experiences encountered by these students studying in Thai universities. Furthermore, current challenges, including shifting economic conditions in China, safety perceptions amplified by media, and the evolving role of social media, require investigation into their impact on recruitment trends and student decisions related to studying in Thailand. There is also a gap in triangulating student perspectives with those of recruitment agents who operate at the interface of supply and demand.

### **Purposes**

This study aims to address these gaps with two primary objectives:

1. To understand the lived experiences of Chinese undergraduate students currently studying at a university in Northern Thailand.

2. To explore the factors, particularly external social factors, that influenced their decision to study in Thailand.

By employing a qualitative design and incorporating perspectives from both students and recruitment agents, this research seeks to provide rich insights into the motivations, decision-making processes, and adaptation experiences of Chinese students in Thailand. The findings can inform Thai higher education institutions in developing more effective recruitment strategies, tailoring support services, and enhancing the overall educational experience. It also contributes empirically to the literature on international student mobility, higher education marketing, cross-cultural adaptation, and the specific dynamics influencing Chinese students' choices in the current global context.

## **Literature Review**

### **Overview of Student Mobility**

International student mobility is often conceptualized through various theoretical lenses, including push-pull models that identify factors driving students away from their home country and attracting them to host countries (Cheung et al., 2019; Guan et al., 2023). While useful, these models may not fully capture the complexity of individual decision-making, social network influences, and post-arrival experiences,

suggesting the need for more nuanced qualitative exploration.

### **Chinese Students Abroad**

China represents a major source of international students globally. Literature often points to motivations such as seeking better educational resources, enhancing career prospects, gaining international experience (Liu et al., 2023), and sometimes navigating the highly competitive domestic education system, particularly the intense pressures associated with the *Gaokao* (National College Entrance Exam) and the hierarchical structure of Chinese universities (e.g., the distinction between regular undergraduate institutions and the elite 985/211 universities). Parental influence is traditionally considered significant in Chinese contexts, although recent studies may indicate shifts towards greater student autonomy (Guan et al., 2023; Lee & Morrish, 2012; Wang & Crawford, 2021).

### **Chinese Students in Thailand**

Thailand has gained prominence as a study destination, particularly for students from neighbouring countries like China. Its appeal is often linked to geographical proximity, perceived affordability, cultural similarities or attractions, and established tourism links which may create familiarity and positive preconceptions (Lee & Morrish, 2012; Rhein & Phillips, 2024). However, research specifically detailing the in-depth motivations and particularly the lived academic and social experiences of Chinese students within Thai higher education remains relatively limited.

### **Factors in Decision-Making**

The decision to study abroad is multifaceted. Beyond individual aspirations and perceived educational benefits (such as using Thai education as a “steppingstone”), social factors play a critical role, especially in collectivistic societies. As described by Fei Xiaotong in “From the Soil”, Chinese society operates on a “graded network of relationships” (差序格局, *Chaxu Geju*), where trust and influence are strongest within close social circles (family, relatives, close friends) (Fei et al., 1992). The concept of Guanxi has implications for how information is sought and trusted, potentially impacting educational choices significantly, as suggested by scholars examining social marketing and trust in Chinese contexts (e.g., King & Wei, 2018; Liao, 2016). Alongside social networks (or Guanxi), economic considerations also play a role. While cost is a known factor, the perception of value-for-money, return on investment, and how economic downturns or shifts in domestic job market value influence decisions require context-specific investigation. Furthermore, the rise of social media platforms popular in China (like WeChat, Douyin, Xiaohongshu) necessitates examining their role versus traditional channels (agents, institutional marketing) in shaping perceptions and decisions. Finally, the recruitment of Chinese students in Thailand has seen challenges in recent years since the Covid pandemic. Such decline in incoming students parallels with the decline in tourists from China. Safety

and Destination Image: Perceptions of safety, influenced by media narratives and specific incidents, can significantly impact destination attractiveness.

### **Student Experience and Cross-Cultural Adaptation**

Once abroad, students undergo adaptation processes. Models like Oberg's (1960) stages of culture shock (honeymoon, disillusionment, etc.) provide a framework. Successful adaptation involves navigating academic, social, and psychological challenges. Key factors include academic integration (coping with different teaching styles, academic rigor), social integration (building networks, interacting with locals and co-nationals), language proficiency, and utilizing coping strategies (Kim, 2001). Positive interpersonal relationships and social support are crucial facilitators (Ward et al., 2005), while mismatches between expectations and reality, particularly concerning academic standards or social interactions, can lead to dissatisfaction (Berry, 2005).

### **Synthesis and Research Gap**

While existing literature covers student mobility, Chinese students abroad, and adaptation theories, specific gaps remain concerning the intricate motivations and lived experiences of Chinese students in Thailand. This study aims to contribute by providing in-depth qualitative insights into their decision-making processes (particularly the role of *Guanxi*), their diverse academic and social experiences within a Thai university, and triangulating these

perspectives with current market insights from recruitment agents, thereby addressing the need for a more holistic understanding in this specific context.

### **Methodology**

Our research objectives were to 1. understand Chinese students' experiences in Thai universities and 2. explore factors, especially external social factors that may have led to their decision to study in Thailand. To achieve these objectives, a qualitative design would help us tap into the nuanced experiences and present a clearer picture.

#### **Sample and Data Collection**

We conducted a focus group discussion with 11 Chinese students currently studying in a university in northern Thailand. To triangulate the data validity, three interviews were then conducted with recruiting agents in China. Contents were transcribed, translated, and coded by the author, and thematic analysis were conducted inductively.

#### **Data Collection and Analysis Process**

Upon the approval of MFU Human Research Committee, the focus group discussion took place within the premise of E1 building in Mae Fah Luang University in November 2024. We posted the recruit advertisement in the unofficial Chinese students' WeChat group two weeks prior to the focus group interview. WeChat is the most routinely used social media platform among Chinese speakers, and the WeChat group usually serves as a virtual community for

Chinese nationals for information updates and classifieds wherever they live. In the recruit advertisement, it was clearly stated the purpose, expected duration, time and location of the focus group interview and that a safe and confidential environment would be provided to all voluntary participants. 11 students participated. Students were presented with a consent sheet after a brief introduction of the research, before discussion started. With their consent, the session was proceeded with audio recording. For the purpose of validity triangulation, we interviewed recruiting agents in the southwestern city of Kunming, which is one of the major sources of Chinese students studying in

Thailand. Two participants were interviewed, with the same protocols.

### **Instruments**

The focus group interview was conducted in Chinese as the primary research is a native Chinese speaker. Semi-structured questions were asked, such as “Tell me your stories of your journey to this university, why Thailand?”, “How did you and your family decided that studying in Thailand is a good decision?”, and “Tell me your experiences studying here, both good and bad.” The focus group interview lasted 2 hours, and each participant contributed their voices in an open, cozy and friendly ambiance. Table 1 presents the profile of the participants.

**Table 1 Participants Profiles**

| <b>Participants</b> | <b>Major/Role</b>          | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Year</b> | <b>From</b> |
|---------------------|----------------------------|---------------|-------------|-------------|
| P 1                 | Multimedia & Animation     | Male          | 3           | Yunnan      |
| P 2                 | Logistics and Supply Chain | Male          | 3           | Yunnan      |
| P 3                 | Tourism Management         | Male          | 3           | Shanxi      |
| P 4                 | English                    | Male          | 4           | Yunnan      |
| P 5                 | Hospitality Management     | Male          | 2           | Hebei       |
| P 6                 | Business Administration    | Male          | 2           | Hubei       |
| P 7                 | Tourism Management         | Female        | 4           | Yunnan      |
| P 8                 | Tourism Management         | Female        | 3           | Yunnan      |
| P 9                 | Multimedia & Animation     | Male          | 3           | Sichuan     |
| P 10                | Tourism Management         | Male          | 3           | Hunan       |
| P 11                | Engineering                | Male          | 3           | Hubei       |
| RA 1                | Recruitment Agent          | Female        |             | Yunnan      |
| RA 2                | Recruitment Agent          | Female        |             | Yunnan      |

**Source:** Author

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis revealed several aspects of motivations and experiences, which may contribute to students’ decisions to undertake higher

education in Thailand. Also, the triangulated interviews with recruiting agents further revealed insider insights into recent changes in the trends posing enrollment challenges facing Thai

universities. Agent findings (4.3) revealed factors such as safety/economic concerns from the perspective of parents. These themes are presented below alongside illustrative quotes directly from the participants.

### **Motivations to study in Thailand**

This theme comprises various reasons Chinese students chose to pursue higher education in Thai universities, covering sub-themes such as personal aspirations, family and relative influences, and economic factors.

#### ***Independent decision-making***

When asked whether the decision to study in Thailand was shared by both students and their parents, surprisingly, most participants confirmed that the decisions were made based on their independent aspirations, while their parents only provided financial and psychological support.

One student stated, *“They (my parents) support the finance for my education, and whatever I wanted to do (with my future), they give me full freedom.”* –P1. Even when parents were with passive attitudes, students made their own decision to study in Thailand. *“In fact, after my Gaokao scores were out, they were very disappointed. I think they were a bit negative and asked me to make my own decisions.”* –P6. As one student recounted, parents of this generation of students seem to only play a supportive role in this big decision.

*“My parents were like, ‘we respect you, if you want to study in China, study in China, if you want to go abroad, you go abroad’. But I feel like they still inclined that I go study abroad...They supported my decision, until my (traffic) accident and injury, then they wanted me to go back*

*immediately, and I had to convince them I would hang on till graduation”.* –P7

The only exception where the parents seemed to have more influence was at the initiation stage. Such initiations were out of family ties and relative influence. See sub-section 4.1.2.

Students’ personal aspirations and their decision-making were influenced by factors including fierce competition in China, international prospects of Thai universities, and tourism and cultural attractiveness of Thailand.

#### ***Fierce competition in China***

Some students viewed Thai universities as a steppingstone to further educational opportunities in other countries. This perception is directly out of the fierce competition in China, heightened by the national college entrance exam (Gaokao) and university ranking systems. These systems post two barriers to the students. Firstly, to qualify a seat in college, they must pass a national exam (Gaokao) towards the end of their high school education. Secondly, the competition also exists in striving for better universities. Although 92.86% of the total 12.91 million students were offered a seat in the year 2021, the total of 3,349 colleges and universities in Mainland China were categorized into two major types: 1,257 undergraduate universities and the others including vocational, specialized, and continuous education institutes. The former consists mainly comprehensive universities that offer undergraduate degrees and the rest provide associate degrees or diplomas. Among the 1,257 universities that offer bachelor’s degrees, 6% are recognized as the 211 or 985 universities which are internationally renowned. The value of seats in these top universities not only provide better career prospects, but also a special recognition reference to top

universities worldwide as they recruit post-graduate applicants from China. Hence, each high school graduate would invest all their energy and resources to get better Gaokao marks, or else, turn to other countries for the undergraduate study, such as Thailand.

Students have a perception that a degree from Thailand provides an easier pathway to universities to Singapore or other countries for further education, compared to a degree from a regular university in China. They perceived that high ranked universities have stricter requirements for Chinese institutions by giving preference to graduates from 985 and 211 universities. By obtaining a degree in Thailand, they hope this international background would potentially circumvent such perceived barriers. As a student recounted:

*“I intend to pursue a master’s degree in Europe or Singapore after graduation here, so studying in Thailand is my ‘springboard’ to other countries for master’s degree...because for example, the National University of Singapore has very high admission requirements for applicants from Chinese universities, they look at if your university is a tier 1 or tier 2 university. Some QS 100 universities also emphasize on where the degree is obtained from...QS 50 for example, if you’re graduated from a regular university, it would be very difficult to get their offers”.*

### ***Tourism and Cultural Attractiveness of Thailand***

As Thailand is geographically close to China, the country has long been a most popular international destination for the Chinese. In our sample, six out of

the eleven participants, or their family members have had previously visited Thailand as tourists. The favorable impression of Thailand gained from past tourism experience also contributed to students’ motivation to pursue their undergraduate studies in Thailand. One student stated, *“Ten years ago, I traveled to Thailand with my grandpa...and the positive experience propelled me into the idea of studying in Thailand”.* –P4

*“I learned that the mode of education in Thailand is somewhat different from China. Studying here is livelier and more relaxed, not as rigid and exam oriented as in China”...“The Thai culture, especially in the north, makes me feel like they live in a very happy lifestyle, very comfortable and enjoyable.”* –P3

In summary, the thematic analysis suggests that the participating Chinese students are very independent when making their decision to study in Thailand. Their parents, although an important supporting role, do not sway their decisions. For the students, their personal aspirations to study in Thailand were subjected to both push (fierce competition in China) and pull factors (steppingstone effect of Thai Higher education, positive past experience as tourists to Thailand).

### ***Family and Social Influence***

The thematic analysis also revealed a major factor contributing to students’ decision to study in Thailand, apart from personal aspirations and individual decision-making. Table 2 presents how source of social influences affecting participants’ decision to study in Thailand.

**Table 2** Participants Subject to Family/Relative Social Influence in Decision-making

| <b>Participant s</b> | <b>Source of social influences</b>   | <b>Quotes</b>  |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| P1                   | Sister's boyfriend                   | <i>"I chose (this university) because my sister's boyfriend was doing master's program here, and he told me he had a very capable professor. I decided to follow him."</i>   |
| P3                   | Cousin                               | <i>"My cousin gave my parents the largest influence. He's a lot older than me, and we are not so close, but he is very close to my parents. He studied his bachelor's in Europe and continued his master's study in Singapore. He has built a career in Southeast Asia now, and he keeps telling my parents Southeast Asia is full of opportunities if you work hard. I had no idea, but my parents bought his words, so we decided I should study in Thailand as it's more affordable than Singapore, which is important for my family's economic constraints."</i> |
| P4                   | Grandfather's family tie in Thailand | <i>"I visited Thailand ten years ago with my grandfather and we were visiting a family relative. They are Thai Chinese. My Thai relative suggested me to study in Thailand for high school, but we decided to do high school in China. My grandfather wanted me to maintain the China-Thai family tie, so after one year gap due to the pandemic, I prepared English test and applied this university"</i>   |
| P6                   | Uncle and his son                    | <i>"My uncle moved to Thailand five or six years ago for business. They were running a family business in Maesai. My cousin, their son has been studying in Thailand since then. After discussion with my parents, we decided that I study in a high school for three years to better prepare my transition to college here. So, I have been adapting to Thai education a bit longer."</i>   |
| P8                   | Mom's friend                         | <i>"My mom has a very good friend who is a teacher by profession. Her son is doing master's program in this university. My mom's teacher friend said she would help contact the recruiting agent if I wanted to study in Thailand, and my mom and I trust her recommendation."</i>   |
| P9                   | Friend from English                  | <i>"I made my own decision, and I wanted to study in Dubai... During the Covid outbreak, many</i>  |

**Table 2** Participants Subject to Family/Relative Social Influence in Decision-making

| Participant s | Source of social influences | Quotes   |
|---------------|-----------------------------|--|
|               | language training class     | <i>universities around the world had shut down from recruiting international students, so I took the break to enroll in an online IELTS training course. One of my classmates, she told me this university in Thailand is still open for application, so I followed her and came here. When I graduate, I will try applying for a master's program in Dubai."</i>  |
| P11           | Cousin's wife               | <i>"Since my college entrance exam results were not so satisfactory, as we were disappointed, my cousin's wife called and recommended my parents to send me to study in Thailand. She is working in an educational service company, some sort of recruiting agent for Thai universities in Kunming. My parents inclined to follow her recommendation, but they said they respect my decision if I wanted to try another year (for the college entrance exam). I decided to give it a try."</i> |

## Discussion

Eight decades ago, the famous sociologist Fei Xiaotong in his book *From the Soil* described the Chinese society with dimensions different from that of the west. One of the main characteristics of cultural norms in the Chinese society as Fei described, was the social trust. In the Chinese society characterized by “差序格局” or “graded network of relationships”. Chinese society is built upon networks of differentiated weight by the proximity of “guanxi”, or “social connections”. The theory therefore proposes that Chinese people place higher trust in those within their immediate social circle (family, close friends, relatives) and diminishing trust as they move further out in their social network (King & Wei, 2018). The theories of Chaxu Geju and Guanxi have provided abundant social marketing

implications in the Chinese context (Liao, 2016). As seen in Table 2 above, among the eleven participants, seven of them incorporated the social influence from their close networks in their decision-making in choosing Thailand for their higher education.

### *Economic factors*

Our student participants did not emphasize on the traditional advantages in budget affordability of higher education in Thailand, as their education are funded by their parents. Only P10 mentioned affordability as his major consideration in choosing to study in Thailand. However, the interviews with recruiting agents revealed that cost remains a significant factor for many students considering studying in Thailand. Many students perceived it as a more affordable option compared to other

international destinations and even certain domestic universities.

*“About one-third of our students prefer to study in Thailand because of relatively lower budget and friendly entry requirements, although recent years, especially after Covid, Malaysia is catching up in terms of cost.” -RA1*

*“Despite of the 20% prices surge in Bangkok due to inflation after Covid, Thai education still has certain value for money, especially for the English-taught programs.” In some cases, the total investment for a college education in Thailand is even lower than some diploma programs in China.” -RA2*

### ***Experiences of studying in Thailand***

Another finding of this study was nuanced experiences of students studying in Thailand, both positive and negative aspects. Thematic analysis provides a first-hand perspective into the Chinese students' life in Thailand. Among the positive experiences, a recurring theme is the more laid-back and comfortable atmosphere compared to their experiences or perceptions of studying in China. P1 explicitly stated *“Thai culture, especially the Northern Thai culture gives off a feeling that the happiness level here is very high”*. This easy-going environment seems to contribute to a sense of well-being and reduced pressure in their student life. As one student reflected on his arrival, *“The first day of my arrival, my buddy received me at the airport and helped me find accommodation so caringly, and I was deeply touched. That feeling was really good.”* Furthermore, the opportunity to explore and experience new things is seen as a major positive. Another student noted, *“Everything is new to me when I travel around or hang out with my classmates. I like all these differences, so many cafes, great*

*atmosphere, all provides a cozy vibe and less pressure than China.”*

Friendly interaction with locals also contributes to the positive experiences. Triangulated by the recruiting agents who mentioned positive perceptions of Thai people's demeanor when contrasting it with safety concerns about the Chinese student community. *“Everyone (of our students) communicated to us by saying, Thai people are so polite, so humble, their lifestyle is so easy-going, they are so friendly to everyone”*.

Moreover, students reported personal growth in various aspects. One student mentioned gaining the ability to cook, indicating increased independence. Another student highlighted the practice-orientation of Thai education by emphasizing the development of critical thinking skills and the ability to analyze information in a practical context. Students also noted the “English immersion” environment as a point of value, as they improve their English language skills while gaining personal development studying in English-taught programs in Thailand.

The students also shared several negative experiences. A significant concern revolves around the lack of academic rigor and a sense of disappointment with the learning style. One student expressed this quite strongly *“I feel like the course materials were meaningless” -P10*. This feeling of inadequacy in their learning is further elaborated by another student who stated, *“I think the things I've learned here is not enough for me to pursue the career I want to build” -P9*. This suggests a disconnect between the students' expectation and perceived quality and depth of the education they receive. The teaching

methods are also a point of contention, with one student lamenting:

*“The instructor deletes a lot of topics from the syllabus only to drop down to the lower level so that everyone can catch up. For example, in a math course, the instructor repeatedly lectured simple things like linear equation in two variables for over forty minutes. I don’t really like the lack of efficiency.” – P2*

This highlight concerns about the pace and depth of instruction. Furthermore, inefficient group projects appear to be a common frustration. One student described the challenges of working with Thai peers, complaining their procrastination and lack of commitment.

*“My Thai teammates have a lot of brilliant ideas, but unfortunately, every time, teaming up with them proves a procrastinated experience. Almost every time, we always only start working in the last minute, the week before the deadline, we almost always stay up nights or we won’t be able to submit. For many times, I wanted to finish the project alone.” – P5*

This inefficiency can lead to increased stress and workload for more proactive students. Another student also pointed out the issue of low efficiency as a general negative aspect studying in Thailand.

Finally, one student expressed disappointment with the administration staff, suggesting some students experience frustrations with the academic environment.

It is important to note that while some students express disappointment with the academic aspects, others have more positive perspectives. Such variation in experiences underscores the diverse expectations and outcomes of studying abroad in Thailand.

The nuanced experiences of Chinese students in Thailand, as highlighted in this study, resonate with the complexities of cultural adaptation. The initial “honeymoon” phase, characterized by the welcoming atmosphere and novel experiences, aligns with what Oberg (1960) describes as the first stage of culture shock. The students’ appreciation for the laid-back Thai culture and the friendly interactions with locals underscores the importance of social support and positive interpersonal relationships in facilitating adjustment (Ward et al., 2005). However, the subsequent frustration with academic rigor and group project inefficiencies reflects the “disillusionment” stage, where discrepancies between expectations and reality become apparent. The perceived lack of academic challenge and the differing work ethics between Thai and Chinese students can lead to feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction, hindering their sense of academic integration (Berry, 2005). This contrast highlights the importance of aligning academic expectations and providing adequate support to international students to navigate these challenges. The variations in student experiences also underscore the individual differences in adaptation, influenced by factors such as personality, prior experiences, and coping strategies (Kim, 2001). The reported issues with administrative staff further emphasize the need for institutional support and clear communication to ensure a positive academic experience for international students.

### ***Agent perspective on Recruitment Trends and Challenges***

Complementing the student narratives on motivations and experiences, the triangulation interview with recruitment agents provided further

insights into the current trends and challenges in recruiting Chinese students for Thai universities. Agents identified several key factors impacting enrollment and student decision-making from their professional standpoint. These factors include concerns over safety and negative perceptions, economic pressures affecting perceived degree value, specific issues related to the Thai education market, regional preferences, and the evolving role of social media.

A primary theme emerging from the agent interviews concerns safety and security perceptions, significantly influenced by prominent media coverage of crime and scams. Agents reported that negative news reports, particularly those concerning criminal activities such as scams in regions of Myanmar adjacent to Thailand's borders, have remarkably dissuaded prospective students and their parents. This localized concern appears to contribute to a broader negative perception of safety in Southeast Asia, amplified by a general negative public opinion towards overseas societies within China. As one agent articulated:

*"The public opinion toward overseas societies is not very friendly in recent years. Especially the scams in northern Myanmar, those areas are proximate to Thailand, so people are concerned when thinking of Southeast Asia in general."* –RA3

Agents view this pervasive negative sentiment as a major obstacle in current recruitment efforts.

Secondly, agents emphasized the significant impact of macroeconomic conditions within China and a perceived depreciation in the value of overseas degrees. They indicated that domestic economic pressures have led to increased budget consciousness among parents – a phenomenon sometimes referred to as “

消费降级” (xiaofei jiangji, or consumption downgrade). This prompts closer scrutiny of the value proposition offered by overseas education, particularly from institutions not perceived as top-tier. Furthermore, agents observed that an overseas undergraduate degree no longer guarantees the same career prospects in China's competitive job market as it might have previously. Consequently, many graduates now opt for domestic postgraduate studies or pursue highly competitive civil service examinations. This challenging employment landscape and a potential shift in attitudes towards the necessity of university degrees were elaborated upon by one agent:

*"In the job market now, even postgraduates don't find good employment, and the competition in civil service exam is so tough, for one position vacancy, there can be 16,000 applicants competing. Under such circumstances, parents are more relaxed on their children's college education. For example, if the child can go on vocational college, let them. Anyways, parents today are less obsessed with the idea that their child must get a degree education after high school. As a result, students are not as keen on study as before."* –RA2

From the agents' perspective, this combination of factors contributes to declining student motivation and thereby enrollment numbers.

Furthermore, agents highlighted specific concerns related to the Thai education market that compound these broader trends. Apprehension about academic rigor, sometimes referencing the colloquial term “水本水硕” implying easily obtained qualifications, affects perceived value. Direct threats, such as financial scams targeting students, elevate

parental caution. Moreover, agents described a challenging recruitment landscape characterized by market saturation due to numerous institutions and agents employing aggressive marketing, which can foster distrust. Simultaneously, the intensified competition among a growing number of Thai institutions actively recruiting internationally further strains the process.

While acknowledging that geographical and cultural proximity remains an attracting factor, particularly for students from regions like Yunnan, agents noted that even these preferences are susceptible to the pervasive negative safety perceptions previously mentioned.

Finally, agents underscored the paramount influence of social media in contemporary student decision-making. Platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu are seen as far more influential than traditional marketing channels (like WeChat official accounts or Weibo). Agents stressed that prospective students place immense trust in peer experiences shared through vlogs and personal accounts. Consequently, they recommended establishing an authentic online presence featuring genuine student experiences as crucial for building trust and attracting applicants in the current environment.

These perspectives from recruitment agents offer a valuable macro-level view of the challenges and dynamics influencing the flow of Chinese students to Thailand, providing context for the individual motivations and experiences detailed earlier.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored the motivations, experiences, and decision-making factors of Chinese students studying at a university in Northern

Thailand, triangulating findings with insights from recruitment agents. Key findings indicate that while many students exhibit independent decision-making, influenced by desires to bypass fierce domestic competition (*Gaokao*) and use Thai education as a “steppingstone” for further study, family and social network influences (*Guanxi*) play a significant, sometimes decisive, role for a substantial portion. Positive past tourism experiences also contribute to Thailand’s attractiveness. Economically, while students themselves did not emphasize cost, agents confirmed affordability remains a key factor for many, although concerns about return on investment are rising amidst economic pressures in China.

Student experiences in Thailand were mixed. Positive aspects included a perceived relaxed atmosphere, friendly interactions with locals, and opportunities for personal growth and English immersion, aligning with initial “honeymoon” adaptation phases. However, significant negative experiences were reported concerning a perceived lack of academic rigor, inefficient teaching methods, frustrations with group work dynamics involving local peers, and administrative issues, reflecting potential “disillusionment” and challenges in academic integration.

Recruitment agents highlighted current trends posing challenges, including widespread safety concerns amplified by negative media reports (particularly regarding regional scams), the impact of China’s economic downturn leading to greater budget scrutiny (“consumption downgrade”), and a perceived depreciation in the value of overseas degrees. Agents also noted market saturation, intense competition among Thai institutions, and the critical

shift towards social media platforms (Douyin, Xiaohongshu) and peer influence in student decision-making, rendering traditional marketing less effective. Concerns about academic value (“水本水硕”) were also echoed by agents.

### **Implications**

The findings provide empirical support for the relevance of *Guanxi* and social network theory in contemporary educational decision-making among Chinese youth. They also illustrate the applicability of cross-cultural adaptation models (Oberg, Berry, Ward, Kim) in the Thai context, highlighting the specific academic and social challenges faced. The study adds nuance to push-pull factors by emphasizing the “steppingstone” motivation and the complex interplay between individual aspiration and social influence.

For Thai Universities, institutions should consider marketing strategies that leverage authentic student experiences on relevant social media platforms. Addressing concerns about academic rigor through curriculum review and transparent communication is crucial. Improving support for group work involving diverse student groups and enhancing administrative efficiency could mitigate negative experiences. Managing student expectations regarding academic challenge and lifestyle is important. For Recruitment Agents, understanding the power of social proof and peer influence is key. Agents need strategies to build trust and address safety and value concerns transparently. For Prospective Students/Parents, access to realistic information about both the benefits and potential challenges (especially academic) of studying in Thailand is vital.

### **Limitations and Recommendation**

This study has several limitations. The qualitative design and relatively small sample size (11 students from one university, 2 agents from one city) limit the generalizability of findings. Convenience sampling may introduce selection bias. Focus group dynamics might have influenced participant responses. Findings rely on self-reported data, which can be subject to recall bias or social desirability. The cross-sectional nature provides only a snapshot in time. The analysis was primarily conducted by one researcher, although triangulation adds validity.

Future research could employ quantitative methods with larger samples across multiple Thai universities to assess the generalizability of these findings. Longitudinal studies could track student adaptation and evolving perceptions over time. Comparative studies exploring the experiences of Chinese students in different Thai regions or comparing them with students in other destinations (like Malaysia) would be valuable. Further investigation into the specific challenges and successes within different academic programs or disciplines is warranted. Research exploring the effectiveness of different university support interventions would also be beneficial.

This study provides valuable qualitative insights into the complex motivations and experiences of Chinese students in Thailand, highlighting the significant roles of personal ambition, social networks, adaptation challenges, and broader socio-economic trends. By understanding these multifaceted factors, stakeholders can better support this important student population and adjust their marketing strategies for international education.

## Acknowledgements

This paper is supported by MFU research project “Unravelling the Factors

Shaping Chinese Students Choice of Thailand as a Study Destination in the Student-Parent Dyadic Perspective”.

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