

Exploring Intercultural Sensitivity among Chinese Undergraduates at a Thai University

Xinrui Wang

Fei Zhao

Chuanchi Chang

Dhurakij Pundit University, Thailand

Corresponding author's email: xinrui.wan@dpu.ac.th

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Abstract

In response to the internationalization of higher education, the number of Chinese students studying in Thai universities has increased in recent years. This has resulted in rising intercultural communication challenges. Accordingly, this mixed-methods study aims to understand Chinese students' intercultural sensitivity and gain further information about their intercultural interactions while studying at a Thai university. Specifically, we sampled the perspectives of 51 Chinese undergraduate enrolled in one large Thai university in Bangkok, Thailand via an online questionnaire. Twenty-one of these students also voluntarily completed online reflective writings about their intercultural communication experience in Thailand. Data from the questionnaire was quantitatively analyzed, while data from reflective writings were analyzed through qualitative content analysis. Results show that overall intercultural sensitivity was at a moderate level. Interaction confidence, interaction engagement, interaction attentiveness, and respect for cultural differences were at moderate levels, whereas interaction enjoyment was at a low level. Results also show that students displayed open-mindedness and empathy in interactions, and they were able to self-monitor. However, they expressed no confidence and tended to make quick judgments about others. Based on these findings, we argue that the Chinese undergraduates we sampled are interculturally sensitive to a moderate degree. Therefore, we suggest that they need to be more involved in social interactions and seek to increase their self-confidence. The results of this study will help intercultural educators gain a better understanding of overseas

students' intercultural sensitivity. It will also help administrators and teachers with curriculum and activity design.

Keywords: intercultural competence, study abroad, Chinese students, Thai tertiary context, Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS)

Studying abroad has become an increasing phenomenon in tertiary education worldwide. The growing number of international students contributes to the multicultural campus and understanding (Bae & Song, 2017; Brown, 2009). In turn, this has led to an increasing interest in and research on intercultural interactions. Unlike short-term visitors, international students usually spend a prolonged period in their host countries, enabling them to engage in extensive intercultural interactions with the residents and individuals from other nations (Bae & Song, 2017; Gu et al., 2010). The capacity to communicate with both effectiveness and appropriateness in multicultural settings is increasingly significant for international students. However, intercultural learning does not happen automatically, and intercultural experience alone does not promote intercultural competence automatically (Deardorff, 2009; Wang & Zhou, 2016). Research has confirmed that although social engagement contributes to international students' emotional growth and intercultural adjustment (Yang, 2016), some reasons, such as stereotyping and cultural differences (Bodycott, 2012), make establishing friendships and social contact difficult. In addition, Asian students abroad are featured as "needy, problematic, and passive" in intercultural interaction (Vu, 2022). In comparison to their peers from other locations, they find it difficult to establish friendships with the locals (Yeh & Inose, 2003).

According to Nation Thailand (January 29, 2023), 14,423 Chinese students were studying at 102 Thai universities in 2020. Universities in Thailand become alternatives to Western universities for Chinese students to study abroad due to reasons such as geographical proximity, affordable tuition fees, and job opportunities created by the ASEAN + 3 (China, South Korea, and Japan) framework and the Belt and Road Initiative. International students must adjust themselves to the host country and adapt to new environments, which helps them live their lives with less difficulty. However, Chinese students in the current study prefer to

live in “Chinatown” around the university and speak the Chinese language to each other, but rarely engage in Thai society. As Marginson (2012) mentioned, international students usually live in a “grey zone”. Their non-citizen outsider status and other issues, such as communication difficulties, make their life in the host country “uncertain, vulnerable, and de-powered” (p. 498). Yu and Moskal (2019) also proposed the phenomenon of “Chinese school”, where numbers of Chinese students sat together in the classroom, automatically isolating them from non-Chinese students. They argued that cultural differences and language difficulties are factors that influence students’ intercultural communication.

The notion of intercultural sensitivity proposed by Chen and Starosta (1997, 2000) emphasizes the role of culture in preparing individuals for successful intercultural communication (Baker, 2012). It refers to “one’s active desire to motivate oneself to understand, appreciate, and accept differences among cultures” (Chen & Starosta, 2000, p. 231). A higher level of intercultural sensitivity indicates a higher level of intercultural competence (Bennett, 2004). Earlier studies on the intercultural sensitivity of international students paid great attention to those who are studying in English-speaking countries (Bean & Boffy-Ramirez, 2019; Vu, 2022), though scholars have advocated focusing on other non-English-speaking regions (Bae & Song, 2017). Studies on Chinese students’ intercultural sensitivity have mainly been conducted in China and employed a quantitative approach to intercultural sensitivity levels and influential factors (Hou, 2010; Zhao, 2018). Only a few studies explored Chinese students’ intercultural sensitivity in the Thai setting (Reungthai, 2012; Zhen, 2020). Therefore, one area that has been neglected is Chinese students studying in non-English-speaking countries, such as Thailand.

Given the gap in previous studies, the current study explores intercultural sensitivity among Chinese undergraduate students studying at a university in Thailand. Drawing on the intercultural sensitivity framework (Chen & Starosta, 1996; 2000), which includes six elements (self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement, and non-judgment), and utilizing the intercultural sensitivity scale (ISS), this study examines the level of intercultural sensitivity and students’ reflections on intercultural interactions that happened in

Thailand during their study period. This study was informed by the following two research questions:

a) What are the overall levels of intercultural sensitivity and levels of each dimension of Chinese students as determined by the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS)?

b) How are elements of intercultural sensitivity reflected in Chinese students' intercultural interaction in Thailand?

Answers to these questions are expected to provide empirical evidence to contribute to our understanding of (a) how intercultural sensitivity is constructed among Chinese students and (b) how intercultural sensitivity is reflected in Chinese students' intercultural interactions. The findings may also provide practical significance in curriculum and activity design.

Conceptualizing Intercultural Sensitivity

Intercultural sensitivity (Chen & Starosta, 1997, 2000) is the affective aspect of an individual's experiences with diverse cultures. It is widely regarded as a prerequisite to acquiring intercultural competence (Chen & Starosta, 2000; Hammer et al., 2003) and is a key predictor of becoming successful intercultural citizens in this globalized community (Chen & Starosta, 2000; Wattanavorakijkul, 2020). Studies revealed that individuals with a higher intercultural sensitivity degree tend to be more interculturally competent (Hammer et al., 2003; Vu, 2020). Being interculturally insensitive can result in problems in intercultural interactions (Wattanavorakijkul, 2020).

Scholars have given different concepts for intercultural sensitivity. Intercultural sensitivity encompasses the necessary qualities for individuals to engage effectively and appropriately with individuals from diverse cultures (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). It involves a curiosity for unfamiliar cultures, the capacity to identify cultural differences, a strong interest in recognizing and valuing these differences, and the willingness to modify their attitudes and behaviors during the interaction. The developmental nature of intercultural sensitivity is extensively elaborated in Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), where an individual's intercultural sensitivity develops through six phases, such as denial, defense, minimizing, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. The first three phases represent

the Ethnocentric worldview, which means “one’s own culture is experienced as central to reality” (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 423), and the remaining three phases represent an ethnorelative worldview, which means “one’s own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures” (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 425). According to DMIS, a person’s intercultural sensitivity grows progressively from the leftmost stage (denial) to the subsequent stages. The movement is not inevitable but depends on the need to become more competent in intercultural communication. People can retreat from one stage to a previous stage (Bennett & Hammer, 2017). However, this model fails to reflect individuals’ subjective motivations in intercultural interaction.

Intercultural sensitivity in the current study is conceptualized through Chen and Starosta’s (1997, 2000) definition. It is “a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promote appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication” (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p. 5). Later, they modified the definition to “one’s active desire to motivate (oneself) to understand, appreciate, and accept differences among cultures” (Chen & Starosta, 2000, p. 231). To them, intercultural sensitivity focuses on personal emotions. Interculturally sensitive people can produce positive feelings that are caused by people and the environment before, during, and after intercultural interactions. They desire to motivate themselves and engage in intercultural interaction and process six features: self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement, and non-judgment.

Self-esteem means “a sense of self-value or self-worth” (Chen & Starosta, 1996, p. 6). According to Borden (1991), self-esteem depends on a person’s perception of the degree of his potential in social interaction. High self-esteem people tend to consider others in a positive light and acknowledge and appreciate differences.

Self-monitoring is the capacity of people to modify actions to fit the situation and achieve their communication goals. It enables individuals to identify situational cues and adopt appropriate behaviors accordingly. High self-monitoring persons are perceptive of the suitability of interactions (Snyder, 1974).

Open-mindedness is another important feature that highlights “the willingness of individuals to openly and appropriately explain

themselves and accept others' explanations" (Chen & Starosta, 1996, p. 7). Bennett (1986) explained open-mindedness as having an internalized broadened worldview. Open-minded individuals tend to acknowledge, embrace, and value diverse perspectives.

Empathy means "the process of projecting oneself into another person's point of view so as momentarily to think the same thoughts and feel the same emotions as the other person" (Adler & Towne, 1987, p. 95). It is deemed the central element of intercultural sensitivity. Interculturally sensitive persons try to share others' experiences and feelings according to the specific communication situation.

Interaction involvement is "the ability of individuals to perceive the topic and situation that involves their conception of self and self-reward" (Chen & Starosta, 1996, p. 8). Interculturally sensitive persons are responsive, perceptive, and attentive in receiving and understanding communication messages. They know when to initiate, take turns, and terminate the topic.

Non-judgment means during the interaction, a person has the attitude to "sincerely listen to others" (Chen & Starosta, 1996, p. 8). An interculturally insensitive person tends to conclude without sufficient information (Hart & Burks, 1972). An interculturally sensitive person will listen to his counterpart, which makes the counterpart feel happy and satisfied.

Intercultural Sensitivity Assessment

Scholars continue working on developing intercultural sensitivity self-assessment tools. One well-cited instrument is the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) (Chen & Starosta, 2000), which was developed according to six elements of intercultural sensitivity. It includes 24 items that are distributed across five dimensions: interaction engagement (7 items), respect for cultural differences (6 items), interaction confidence (5 items), interaction enjoyment (3 items), and interaction attentiveness (3 items). Although the scale was first created in the United States, it is continuously tested in other Western and non-Western contexts (e.g., Kim et al., 2017; Wattanavorakijkul, 2020; Zhao, 2018) and "has demonstrated strong reliability and appropriate concurrent and predictive validity" (Chen & Starosta, 2000, p. 12).

Besides the quantitative measurement above, the measurement can also be the descriptions and interpretations of the experiences of cultural differences qualitatively. Through intercultural interactions in diverse cultural contexts, individuals may experience cultural differences and develop intercultural sensitivity (Chen & Starosta, 1997). For example, in the earlier work, Bennett (1986) presented the diagnosis and developmental strategies for each stage from a qualitative perspective. Bennett and Hammer (2017) also illustrated some typical questions and interpretations. For example, a person could be asked to give an example of how he changed behavior in diverse cultural contexts to communicate effectively. The more behavior changes, the more resolved is the issue of context shifting, which indicates that the person is more relevant to the adaptation stage. Therefore, a qualitative approach such as reflective writing about intercultural interaction experiences helps students provide information on how they perceive cultural differences and reveal facets of their sensitivity.

The current study employs the ISS to assess Chinese students' intercultural sensitivity because, first, the scale is a culture-free instrument developed based on Chen and Starosta's (2000) IS conceptual framework. In addition, each item statement is short, and the scale consists of only 24 items, which could not consume participants too much time (Wattanavorakijkul, 2020). Third, the scale has already been tested by studies that were conducted in Thailand or China, which have a similar context to this current research. Finally yet importantly, to increase credibility, this study also employed a reflective journal to collect qualitative data.

Related Studies on Students' Intercultural Sensitivity in Asian Countries

In the past few years, a substantial number of studies have explored students' intercultural sensitivity. The following presents a review of previous studies conducted in Asia countries based on Chen and Starosta's (2000) framework.

Wattanavorakijkul (2020) measured Thai university students' intercultural sensitivity to understand the impact of a short-term program in the US. The study revealed that although participants were fluent in

the English language, their intercultural sensitivity was insufficient. Participants expressed a lack of motivation and self-confidence to engage with others from diverse cultural contexts. Vu (2022) evaluated returned overseas Vietnamese students' intercultural sensitivity. Results found that students excelled at *respect for cultural differences*, closely behind were *international engagement*, *interaction attentiveness*, and *interaction confidence*. The least competent element was *interaction enjoyment*.

Other studies focused on local subjects. Peng (2006) surveyed 382 Chinese to understand the structure of intercultural sensitivity among English majors, non-English majors, and multinational employees. The results indicated that English language proficiency influences intercultural sensitivity. This finding contrasted with Wattanavorakijkul's (2020) findings. In addition, five dimensions of intercultural sensitivity were weighted differently among three groups of subjects. For example, English majors felt more *interaction enjoyment* than non-English majors and multinational employees. In addition, their *interaction engagement* and *interaction enjoyment* had an impact on *respect for cultural differences*. Hou (2010) examined 95 Chinese local subjects' intercultural sensitivity levels. The study found that participants had a positive attitude toward intercultural communication. In detail, they demonstrated the highest proficiency in interacting with others, whereas their weakest ability was *interaction enjoyment*. However, the data in this study was only analyzed by frequency and percentage, which may hide more details. Zhao (2018) examined 102 Chinese postgraduates' intercultural sensitivity. The study revealed that *respect for cultural differences* was at the highest level, which was consistent with Vu's (2022) finding, although the participants had different studying abroad experiences. *Interaction confidence* was the lowest, which was partly in line with the findings from Vu (2022) and Wattanavorakijkul (2020).

In a more specific context, only a few studies have explored intercultural sensitivity among Chinese students studying in Thailand. Reungthai (2012) assessed Chinese undergraduates in a "2+2 Joint Venture Program" at a Thai university. The results revealed that Chinese students had an elevated level of *interaction engagement*. *Interaction attentiveness*, *interaction confidence*, and *respect for cultural differences* were assessed as moderate. The *interaction enjoyment* was at a low level. These results were partly consistent with Hou's (2010)

findings, which indicate that Chinese participants were willing to be engaged in intercultural interactions, but the joyfulness of interactions may not always be as expected. Zhen (2020) examined 63 Chinese exchange students in Thailand. The study showed that students had a high intercultural sensitivity level in general. More specifically, they had an elevated level of *interaction engagement*, *respect for cultural differences*, and *interaction attentiveness*, whereas *interaction confidence* and *interaction enjoyment* were at a moderate level. However, the qualitative interview data revealed that students lacked *interaction confidence*, which did not support the quantitative results.

To conclude, the ISS developed by Chen and Starosta (2000) is widely employed in various contexts to assess intercultural sensitivity. These studies revealed that the impact of language proficiency on intercultural experiences varies among different participants, but higher language proficiency may contribute to interaction enjoyment. Participants in many studies were not confident in their interactions, but they were still willing to be engaged. As Marginson (2014) pointed out, individuals always have a powerful desire to establish friendships and achieve contact with others. Meanwhile, differentiated results reflected in these studies also revealed the complexity of intercultural sensitivity.

We argue that individuals must have a desire to engage in intercultural interactions with people from diverse cultural backgrounds so that they can encounter cultural differences and gradually become more culturally sensitive. We also argue that by having individuals reflect on key events in their intercultural interactions, more information, such as their emotions, behaviors, and understanding of others, can be revealed.

This study intends to bridge the research gap in two aspects. First, from a methodological perspective, previous research has employed quantitative methods, specifically assessing the intercultural sensitivity levels, the correlations among its dimensions, and the influencing factors. However, the ISS only provides a collective perspective on participants' intercultural sensitivity levels but ignores personal differences. In addition, the absence of qualitative data may lead to the oversight of in-depth information. Second, from a pragmatic perspective, previous studies focused heavily on Chinese students studying in Western countries. Their intercultural sensitivity is different from that of those

studying in Thailand due to different learning motivations, future expectations, and the host country's cultural influences. To fill in these gaps, this study combines quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate and explore the intercultural sensitivity of Chinese international students in Thailand.

Methodology

Research Design

According to Tracy (2010), mixed methods not only help to explore and interpret several aspects of problems but also provide data triangulation. Therefore, this study is designed as a mixed-methods research. In the quantitative section the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) (Chen & Starosta, 2000) is employed to collect participants' intercultural sensitivity, and Best and Kahn's criteria (1998) are used to analyze the data. In the qualitative section, participants' reflective journals are employed to collect their intercultural interaction experience, and deductive category qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015) is used to analyze the data.

Research Context and Participants

The research setting is one of the most famous private universities in Bangkok, Thailand. The university has been recruiting Chinese students since 2010. According to the administration of the international college at this university, there are currently about 150 Chinese undergraduate students enrolled in the academic years 2022-2023. It is worth mentioning that data collection took place during the post-pandemic period when Chinese students were returning to the university. Given the potential influence of students' schedules on data collection, convenience sampling was employed.

The participants were 51 Chinese students majoring in International Business who took part in the *Cross-Cultural Communication in Business* course. Several participants were in their third year 19 (37%), and 32 (63%) participants were in their fourth year. Among them, 32 (63%) are male and 19 (37%) are female. Informal communication with the course lecturer indicated that the teaching materials did not explicitly contain any content related to intercultural sensitivity. Therefore, we

consider this study an exploration of the primitive state of Chinese students' intercultural sensitivity without any intentional instruction.

Research Procedure

This study was conducted following standard ethical procedures, and there was no conflict of interest. After obtaining ethical approval, we made an appointment with the lecturer for the *Cross-Cultural Communication in Business* course. At the appointed time, we approached the participants in the classroom. We first introduced the broad purpose of this study to participants. All of them were explicitly informed that their involvement was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any time without explaining. Then, informed consent forms were given to all participants, ensuring they were aware of the purpose and procedure of this study as well as their rights and possible benefits from the study. After that, a link to the questionnaire and another link to reflective journals were provided to all participants. Participants had two weeks to fill out the questionnaire and the reflective journal. In addition, they were suggested to finish it at any time except in class. Last, all participants were reassured that this study was highly confidential and would not have any influence on their academic results.

Research Instruments

Questionnaire

The questionnaire (Appendix A) consists of three parts: (a) an introduction to the research, (b) demographic information, and (c) the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) (Chen & Starosta, 2000).

Demographic information includes academic year, gender, experience in Thailand and other countries, preference to cooperate with people from different countries, experience in intercultural activities organized by the university, and last semester's English final score.

The ISS (Chen & Starosta, 2000) is a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). It includes 24 items distributed in five dimensions. Examples of each dimension are as follows. *Interaction engagement*: I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures; *respect for cultural differences*: I find it very hard to talk in front of people from different

cultures; *interaction confidence*: I often feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures; *interaction enjoyment*: I am open-minded to people from different cultures; *interaction attentiveness*: I think my culture is better than other cultures. Among these 24 items, items 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, and 22 were “reverse-coded” (Chen & Starosta, 2000, p. 12).

The questionnaire was initially written in English. To facilitate Chinese participants’ better and more accurate understanding of every item, the questionnaire was then translated into Chinese. An expert in English language teaching reviewed the translation. To test the understandability of the statements in the questionnaire, 10 Chinese students from the same faculty who were not involved in this study participated in a pilot study. They gave feedback that the questions in the questionnaire were understandable and easy to answer; therefore, the questionnaire was not modified.

Reflective Journal

The reflective journal includes participants’ narrations regarding one intercultural interaction experience during the study period in Thailand. Every participant was invited to answer three themes: (a) describe an intercultural communication experience you had in Thailand, (b) judge whether this experience was a success or a failure, and (c) analyze the reasons for success or failure. There were no word limitations and participants were allowed to select using Chinese or English according to their preference. These reflective journals provide insights into Chinese students’ challenges and feelings in intercultural communication through critical incidents.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire was analyzed by SPSS, a statistical program, in terms of frequency, percentage, mean scores, and standard deviations. The Skewness and Kurtosis values were found in the range of (-2 to +2), which indicates the data was normally distributed (Weaver & Wuensch, 2013). Based on Best and Kahn’s criteria (1998), the overall level of Chinese students’ intercultural

sensitivity and its five dimensions (interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness) were evaluated and classified into five levels: highest, high, moderate, low, and lowest, using the mean score.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Data collected from reflective journals was analyzed by qualitative content analysis. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) defined it as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 1278). Ezzy (2002) proposed, “qualitative research methods are particularly good at examining and developing theories that deal with the role of meanings and interpretations”. It is also a technique to gather data from participants’ behaviors to provide a more comprehensive inquiry (Chaiyasat, 2020).

As Ezzy (2002) pointed out, the rigor of qualitative data analysis depends on carefully designed procedures to uncover participants’ understanding structures. The analysis procedure follows Mayring’s (2015) deductive category assignment convention.

First, we confirmed that the analysis of participants’ intercultural interaction experience is based on Chen and Starosta’s (1997, 2000) intercultural sensitivity theoretical framework. A culturally sensitive individual processes six features (self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement, and non-judgment) and they desire to motivate themselves and engage in intercultural interaction. Second, we established a coding guideline including definitions, anchor examples, and coding rules. We excluded those writings if (a) they simply express emotions and (b) they only describe the process of intercultural interaction.

An example of exclusion criteria (a) is as follows:

(When playing online games) we were speaking rude words to each other. Although we were upset, we persisted with the game.

An example of exclusion criteria (b) is as follows:

I asked him which flight he was on, and he answered me.
I told him 'Me too,' and I continued to ask for his seat number...

Third, we read and re-read the reflective writings individually multiple times to become familiar with the data and conducted preliminary coding. We highlighted sentences or phrases that reflect six elements with assorted colors, focused on whether they revealed positive (or negative) personal emotions, represented active desire, and motivated oneself to engage during the interaction. Then, we categorized them into groups and generated themes. In the following, we present two coding examples to illustrate.

The following descriptions will be coded as self-monitoring because the student was able to regulate and modify her behavior to suit a specific interaction scenario. She was able to notice subtle social cues. This suggests a greater degree of intercultural sensitivity and might make her more effective in intercultural communication.

- (1) I noticed that the Thai aunt was smiling and in a good mood, so I felt that things were not as bad as I thought. Every experience makes me grow.

The following descriptions will be coded as self-esteem because the student had a sense of negative self-value due to language inefficiency. Although the student evaluated herself negatively, it indicated that she had high self-esteem. Therefore, she is likely to think well of others and recognize and respect the cultural differences in interaction.

- (2) This experience strengthened my determination to learn English well; otherwise, I could only communicate with others using gestures. I would worry that they looked down on us Chinese, and I would feel embarrassed from the bottom of my heart.

Finally, we worked through all writings and processed analysis, category, and interpretation. To ensure accuracy and reliability, we coded the data independently twice, with a one-week interval between the two rounds of coding. The results were then compared, analyzed, and discussed together.

Results and Discussions

The following first presents the results of demographic information and answers to two research questions, and then discusses these results and implications.

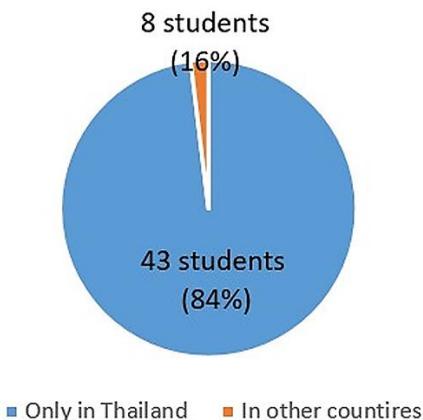
Demographic Information

(a) Experience in Thailand and Other Countries

All the participants have at least 5 months of experience in Thailand. Several students, 8 (16%), indicated that they have visited countries such as Australia, Japan, and Korea for travel. The remaining 43 students (84%) have not traveled to any country other than Thailand (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Frequency of students' experience in Thailand and other countries

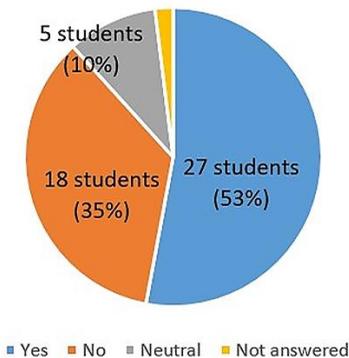


(b) Preference to Cooperate with People from Different Countries

Twenty-seven (53%) participants indicated that they were willing to cooperate with people from different countries. They see it as a good opportunity to broaden their horizons and mentioned reasons such as feeling happy, enthusiastic, and appreciating diversity. However, 18 (35%) participants clearly expressed that they do not prefer to cooperate with others because of language incompetence, unfamiliar cultural values, and communication barriers. There were 5 (10%) participants who expressed a neutral attitude and one (2%) who did not answer this question (Figure 2).

Figure 2

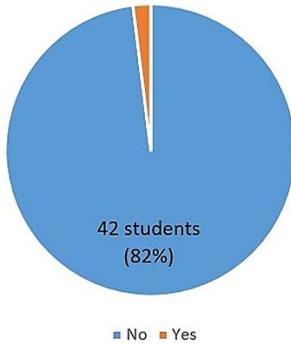
Frequency of students' preference to cooperate with people from different countries

***(c) Experience in Participating in Intercultural Activities***

Only 9 students (18%) have participated in intercultural activities such as the *Thai-China Go (Weiqi) Event* and *International Student Evening* organized by the university. The rest of them indicated that they had never participated in such intercultural activities (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Frequency of students' experience in participating in intercultural activities

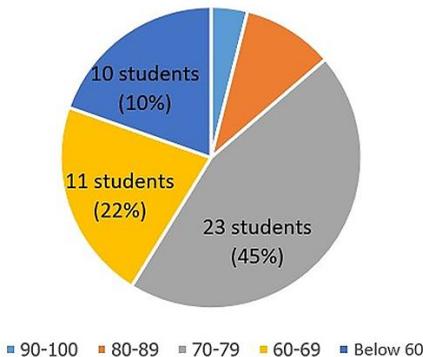


(d) Last Semester's English Final Score

Only two students (3%) and five students (10%) scored between 90-100 and 80-89, respectively. The majority, 23 students (45%), scored between 70-79. There were 11 (22%) students scored between 60-69, while 10 (20%) students scored below 60 (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Frequency of students' English final score



Research Question 1: What is the overall level of intercultural sensitivity and the level of each dimension of Chinese students determined by the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS)?

Table 1 demonstrates that the overall mean score of intercultural sensitivity of Chinese students was $X = 3.15$. In detail, the mean scores of its five dimensions ranked from the highest to the lowest were interaction confidence ($X = 3.35$), interaction engagement ($X = 3.33$), interaction attentiveness ($X = 3.14$), respect for cultural differences ($X = 3.08$), and interaction enjoyment ($X = 2.51$). According to Best and Kahn's (1998) criteria, the result revealed that Chinese students' intercultural sensitivity was at a moderate level. Interaction confidence, interaction engagement, interaction attentiveness, and respect for cultural differences were at a moderate level, while interaction enjoyment was at a low level.

Table 1
Mean scores of intercultural sensitivity

Intercultural Sensitivity	Mean	SD	Level of Intercultural Sensitivity
1. Interaction Confidence	3.35	0.30	Moderate
2. Interaction Engagement	3.33	0.45	Moderate
3. Interaction Attentiveness	3.14	0.55	Moderate
4. Respect for Cultural Differences	3.08	0.38	Moderate
5. Interaction Enjoyment	2.51	0.53	Low
Total	3.15	0.22	Moderate

Research Question 2: How are elements of intercultural sensitivity reflected in Chinese students' intercultural interaction in Thailand?

Twenty-one participants provided reflective writing. The six features of an intercultural sensitive person proposed by Chen and Starosta's (1997, 2000) framework are all reflected in their intercultural interactions.

Theme 1 Shyness and low self-confidence in interactions

Self-esteem is defined as “a sense of self-value or self-worth” (Chen & Starosta, 1996, p. 6). High self-esteem persons tend to consider others positively and acknowledge and appreciate differences. In the students’ reflections, we observe feelings of shyness, nervousness, fear, and hesitation during intellectual communication. In Extract 1, participant A clearly expresses her lack of confidence in communicating with foreigners. She attributed her lack of confidence to poor English proficiency and unwillingness to challenge herself to overcome it. In Extract 2, participant B described a situation when she was communicating with a Thai stallholder but encountered language barriers. She also mentioned self-esteem during the interaction process. She believed that higher self-confidence might lead to better intercultural communication. These extracts revealed that both participants are not confident in interactions.

Extract 1

My English is too poor. I have been in my comfort zone for too long. I am not willing to take on challenges, and I have no confidence in myself to communicate with foreigners.

Extract 2

It would have been better if I had been more confident in this communication.

Theme 2 Able to self-monitoring and adjust

Self-monitoring is the capacity of individuals to modify their actions to fit the situation and achieve their communication goals. High self-monitoring persons are sensitive to finding cues in interactions to develop appropriate behaviors. In Extract 3, participant B reflected that when she faced communication barriers, she could notice environmental cues in time and adjust her attitude and behavior appropriately to continue the communication. In Extract 4, participant C describes the first time a Thai friend visited his apartment. In this case, he also demonstrates the ability to self-monitoring and adjusts his behavior according to the other party’s.

Extract 3

The stallholder kept shaking his head. He couldn't understand the English I was speaking. And I couldn't understand the Thai he was speaking either. When a Thai girl who spoke fluent English tried to help me, I was very nervous at first. But after several seconds, I started looking for some keywords in my head.

Extract 4

When she (my Thai friend) first came in the door, I was ready to give her slippers. But she didn't want them. I was worried that she might catch a cold and insisted on giving her slippers. But she said that all Thais are [sic] barefoot in the room. I could understand that. So, I didn't give her slippers, and I didn't wear them myself.

Theme 3 Open-mindedness but unrelated to myself

Open-mindedness is “the willingness of individuals to openly and appropriately explain themselves and accept others’ explanations” (Chen & Starosta, 1996, p. 7). Open-minded individuals tend to acknowledge, accept, and value diverse perspectives. In the reflective journals of the 21 participants, there was little talking about explaining oneself or accepting others’ explanations. Participant D mentioned that when communicating with a Japanese friend, he was willing to understand and appreciate the other’s religious beliefs (Extract 5). But he pointed out that the reason was that he felt it was none of his business. A likely reason for this result could be the poor English language skills of the participants, which limited interaction contents to a superficial level.

Extract 5

He (my Japanese friend) is a Christian, has been trying to get me to study the Bible, and has told me a lot about his religion, and activities. I learned about his country, religion, and customs, but I am an atheist. I would not recognize and accept their beliefs.

Theme 4 Willingness to put oneself in another’s situation

Empathy means “the process of projecting oneself into another person’s point of view so as momentarily to think the same thoughts

and feel the same emotions as the other person” (Adler & Towne, 1987, p. 95). In Extract 6, participant E mentioned her experience in a social place. In this case, she showed the ability to project herself into the other’s situation and try to think and feel the same as the other. In Extract 7, participant F expressed his sympathy for a Thai teacher’s dismissal. When he knew that the teacher had found a new job, he also felt relieved and offered his best wishes.

Extract 6

I was not too keen to give him (a Western guy) my social account. But considering his feelings, maybe he just wanted to make friends. I agreed anyway.

Extract 7

When I knew that Teacher Lek had been dismissed from the university, I was shocked because she was always friendly to the students and often helped us in our daily lives. Fortunately, later on, I found that she got a new job at another university and was still pursuing her beloved career in dance. I was happy for her.

Theme 5 Poor interaction involvement

Interaction involvement is “the ability of individuals to perceive the topic and situation that involves their conception of self and self-reward” (Chen & Starosta, 1996, p. 8). Interculturally sensitive persons know when to initiate, take turns, and terminate the topic. A few participants mentioned how they were involved in interactions. In Extract 8, participant G mentioned her experience of buying bread in the university coffee shop. In this case, she demonstrated poor interaction involvement. The communication was built on guessing when encountering difficulties. She could not initiate new communication in other ways.

Extract 8

The waitress asked me a question in Thai, which I didn’t understand as I was a newcomer to Thailand. I guessed she was saying that the bread was sold out, so I said OK. I noticed that the waitress had put the bread in the microwave to heat it up. So, I knew that she was probably asking me if it needed to be heated.

Theme 6 Make quick judgments based on personal experience

Non-judgment means that during the interaction, a person has the attitude to “sincerely listen to others” (Chen & Starosta, 1996, p. 8). Interculturally sensitive persons tend to listen to their counterparts. In contrast, interculturally insensitive persons will conclude without sufficient information. In reflective journals, a substantial number of statements involve quick judgments. In Extract 9, participant D talked about how he judged the nationality of a person by his English accent.

Extract 9

When I first met my Japanese friend, I thought he was Chinese. Because he was speaking English with a Chinese accent.

The other example is provided by Participant H, who randomly interviewed passersby at a mall. He determined whether a person was suitable for the interview based on their appearance and made unreasonable judgments about their national status (Extract 10).

Extract 10

Starting to observe the pedestrians passing by, I finally settled on a handsome Westerner as my target for the interview. He had a large, bald head with a long beard and an orange shirt. Based on his appearance, I thought he might be from a small, unknown country.

Extract 9 and Extract 10 revealed that participants tended to make quick judgments about their counterparts, always based on surface factors such as accent or appearance. In addition, participants drew conclusions based on their guesses without sufficient evidence.

The above results suggest that, first, all participants have had at least five months of living experience in Thailand, so it is reasonable to ask them to reflect on their intercultural interactions in Thailand. We should notice that only 16% of students have traveled to countries other than Thailand. This suggests that the people with whom the students have interacted mostly comprise Thai nationals and foreigners residing in Thai society, limiting the students' interaction context to the Asian region. Second, more than half of the participants clearly stated that they are willing to cooperate with people from different countries, probably

because international students always have a desire to establish friendships and connect with host countries (Marginson, 2014). However, we pointed out that although the university regularly hosts various cross-cultural events, only 18% of students have participated in such activities. If it is not mandatory (such as during their leisure time), students prefer to stay with Chinese friends and rarely engage in Thai society. Wattanavorakijkul (2020) also found that overseas Thai students were less motivated to interact with others from various cultures. This situation may be attributed to the students' low English proficiency. Although Wattanavorakijkul (2020) found that participants with an elevated level of English did not possess a greater degree of intercultural sensitivity, other studies, such as Peng (2006), have confirmed that English language proficiency does influence intercultural sensitivity. Poor English proficiency may make students feel that it is difficult to express themselves accurately, decrease self-confidence, and reduce motivation to participate.

Students have an overall moderate level of intercultural sensitivity. Bosuwon (2017) and Savage (2018) pointed out that the duration of the stay in another cultural context is one factor that enhances intercultural sensitivity. The pandemic happened while they were studying in Thailand, causing most students to return to China for online classes. These students did not have prolonged experience living in Thailand. Months to a few years' experience in Thailand is insufficient to contribute to high sensitivity. In another study, the situation is different. Zhen (2020) found that Chinese exchange students who had experience in Thailand for two years had an overall elevated level of intercultural sensitivity.

As for the five dimensions of the intercultural sensitivity scale, students have a moderate level of interaction confidence. This result is also found in Zhen's (2020) study. She attributed moderate confidence to students who had learned the Thai language and culture before coming to Thailand. They knew how to behave with Thais. In contrast, Chinese students in this study did not receive pre-departure language and cultural training. They only had a *Cross-Cultural Communication in Business* course, which was not specific to any culture. Therefore, they expressed in reflective writings that they felt shy, nervous, and hesitated in communication. In addition, the reason for the inconsistency between quantitative and qualitative results may be attributed to the

self-report questionnaire, where participants produce a desirable response rather than a fact (Moskowitz, 1986).

Although the quantitative data shows that students had a moderate level of interaction engagement, reflective writings revealed a different situation. There is little feedback on how students initiate, shift, or terminate topics in their communication. Rather, they heavily rely on guessing to keep the dialogue going. Different from this study, Zhen (2020) found that Chinese students in a Thai university had an elevated level of interaction engagement. It is worth noting that in Zhen's (2020) study, the Chinese students are of the Zhuang ethnicity from a Sino-Thai Joint-Venture program. They share a similar linguistic system with Thais, making them willing to interact with Thai people. Hou (2010) pointed out that Chinese students might find discrepancies between cultural knowledge from textbooks and real-life interactions, leading to hesitations.

Students showed a moderate level of interaction attentiveness. Attentiveness is reflected by empathy and self-monitoring in interactions (Chen & Starosta, 1997). Attentive people show understanding and consideration toward others and can modify actions to fit the situation (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Interaction attentiveness is also reflected in reflective writing. Students can engage in empathy-based communication and detect cues to develop appropriate behaviors. Zhen (2020) also confirmed that Chinese students are observant in interactions and are tolerant in understanding different viewpoints.

The mean score of respect for differences ranked fourth among the five dimensions, revealing that students' ability to identify and respect differences is weak. This result is also confirmed by students' reflective writings. Very few students mentioned discovering cultural differences, adopting an open attitude, and respecting differences during the communication process. Cultural differences students recognized were primarily surface level, such as Thais not wearing shoes indoors. For other deeper-level cultural differences, such as beliefs, students tend to adopt an indifferent attitude. Wattanavorakijkul (2020) explained that some cultural differences, such as beliefs or practices, might be difficult or too complicated for students. We argue that it is because students cannot recognize deeper cultural differences that they tend to make quick judgments about others from unfamiliar cultures based on their impressions (e.g., accent, appearance). Participating in intercultural

activities not only helps in identifying cultural differences but also, through the friendships built, exposes students to different perspectives, broadens their worldview, and enhances intercultural sensitivity (Chocce, 2014). However, only 18% of students indicated that they had participated in such activities organized by the university. It is promising that 53% of students expressed their willingness to cooperate with people from different countries due to personal growth factors such as broadening their horizons and feeling happy.

The result found that students have a low level of interaction enjoyment. Several studies (Hou, 2010; Reungthai, 2012; Vu, 2022) got the same result. The result is supported by the fact that 35% of students explicitly expressed that they are not willing to collaborate with people from other cultural backgrounds. Their English scores also support this result. Because English language proficiency enables students to enjoy intercultural interaction and provides them with more opportunities to have friends from diverse cultures (Wattanavorakijkul, 2020), and further promotes intercultural sensitivity (Bosuwon, 2017). The qualitative result, poor interaction involvement, also confirmed this result. As students' feedback, in communication, they rely on guessing and hardly know when to initiate, take turns, and terminate the topic. Although Hymes (1972) believed "competence is dependent upon both [tacit] knowledge and [ability] use" (p. 282) and Brislin and Yoshida (1994) suggested that successful intercultural communication does not necessarily depend on foreign language fluency, we argue that foreign language proficiency is one of the foundations of intercultural communication, as it affects participants' confidence, experiential quality, and willingness for engagement and deeper interaction.

Conclusion

This study explored intercultural sensitivity among Chinese undergraduates enrolled in a Thai university. The overall level of intercultural sensitivity and each dimension are at a moderate or low level. Students displayed empathy in communication, and they could monitor themselves to adjust their behavior based on specific circumstances. However, they lack confidence, fail to recognize deeper cultural differences, and lack involvement. They rarely participate in the university's intercultural activities, but many of them acknowledge the benefits of

collaborating with others. We conclude that the study abroad experience did not provide students with sufficient opportunities to interact with people from diverse cultures, thus there is room for improvement in students' intercultural sensitivity.

The contributions of this study lie in two aspects. First, from a methodological perspective, this study not only provides a collective understanding of Chinese students' intercultural sensitivity level but also reveals in-depth information about how elements of intercultural sensitivity are reflected during students' intercultural interactions. Second, from a pragmatic perspective, this study offers insights for administrators and teachers in terms of curriculum and activity design. For example, English and Thai language training courses that focus on daily communication can help Chinese students improve their foreign language proficiency and cope with obstacles in intercultural interactions. Instead of intercultural knowledge, the cross-cultural communication course may assign task-based projects to encourage students to step out of the classroom and immerse themselves in specific interaction scenarios. Incentive mechanisms, such as combining intercultural activities and attendance with credits, can be established to force students' involvement.

This study has its limitations. First, the use of a non-probability sampling method could potentially create sampling bias and limit the ability to generalize the findings to a larger population. Second, although reflective journals reduce students' nervousness and provide them with a more relaxed environment to express themselves, there is no opportunity for in-depth questioning of what the students have described. The contents also depend on their writing proficiency. Third, the analysis of qualitative data is influenced by the authors' experiences. Further studies may enlarge the sample size by including Chinese students at other Thai universities.

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Appendix A The Intercultural Sensitivity Questionnaire (English Version)

Instruction

This questionnaire includes two sections. Section one is about your demographic information and section two is a series of statements about intercultural communication. There are no right or wrong answers. All information you provide will be kept confidential. Thank you for your cooperation.

Section one: Demographic information

1. Grade _____
2. Gender _____
3. How long have you been studying in Thailand?
____(Year)____(Months)
4. Have you been to countries other than Thailand? If yes, please specify the country and visiting purpose.
5. Do you prefer to cooperate with people from different countries? Please specify your reasons.
6. Have you participated in intercultural activities organized by the university? If yes, please specify the name of the activity.
7. What is your English final score of the last semester?

Section two: The intercultural sensitivity scale

Please work quickly according to your first impression and indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements. (5= strongly agree; 4=agree; 3=uncertain; 2=disagree; 1=strongly disagree)

- ___ 1. I enjoy interacting with people from diverse cultures.
- ___ 2. I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.
- ___ 3. I am quite sure of myself in interacting with people from diverse cultures.
- ___ 4. I find it extremely hard to talk in front of people from diverse cultures.
- ___ 5. I always know what to say when interacting with people from diverse cultures.

- ___ 6. I can be as sociable as I want to be when interacting with people from diverse cultures.
- ___ 7. I do not like to be with people from unfamiliar cultures.
- ___ 8. I respect the values of people from diverse cultures.
- ___ 9. I get upset easily when interacting with people from unfamiliar cultures.
- ___ 10. I feel confident when interacting with people from diverse cultures.
- ___ 11. I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally distinct counterparts.
- ___ 12. I often get discouraged when I am with people from unfamiliar cultures.
- ___ 13. I am open-minded to people from diverse cultures.
- ___ 14. I am very observant when interacting with people from unfamiliar cultures.
- ___ 15. I often feel useless when interacting with people from unfamiliar cultures.
- ___ 16. I respect the ways people from diverse cultures behave.
- ___ 17. I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from unfamiliar cultures.
- ___ 18. I would not accept the opinions of people from unfamiliar cultures.
- ___ 19. I am sensitive to my culturally distinct counterpart's subtle meanings during our interactions.
- ___ 20. I assume my culture is better than other cultures.
- ___ 21. I often give positive responses to my culturally different counterparts during our interaction.
- ___ 22. I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally distinct persons.
- ___ 23. I often show my culturally distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues.
- ___ 24. I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally distinct counterpart and me.