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Chinese Students' Intercultural Academic Adaptation at a Thai University

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Abstract

While previous research has mainly focused on the intercultural experiences of Chinese students in English-speaking countries, this mixed-methods study examines their academic adaptation at a Thai university. Employing the framework of material, social, and subjective culture, the study surveyed 290 students. The results indicated a high level of adaptation to material and social cultures. Students adapted well to aspects such as the campus environment, digital learning tools, and teacher–student relationships. However, their subjective adaptation was moderate. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve students to gain deeper insights. The thematic analysis revealed that students were confident in using digital tools and AI technologies. They continually managed interactions with teachers and peers and gradually changed their beliefs about learning. At the same time, they encountered minor challenges, such as discomfort with classroom facilities. The results offer a multidimensional understanding of academic adaptation and highlight the interconnectedness of the three cultural dimensions. Material and social cultures shape students' academic practices, which in turn influence their developing subjective culture. This study extends theoretical frameworks of academic adaptation to a non-Western context and provides implications for teachers and administrators to develop targeted support mechanisms, such as collaborative learning programs and training in AI-supported learning, to improve students' academic integration.

Keywords: intercultural experience, Chinese international students, cultural dimensions, academic culture, Thai higher education

Students' intercultural experience has become a central aspect of international higher education within the context of global student mobility. As students pursue degrees abroad, their ability to adapt to new social and academic environments has drawn sustained attention from researchers and higher education institutions. Intercultural adaptation is widely recognized as an important factor for students' academic success (Sun et al., 2020). Effective

adaptation promotes student engagement and academic performance, and it supports psychological well-being and overall satisfaction (Sun et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2024). However, adaptation often involves environmental, psychological, sociocultural, and academic challenges (Berry, 1985; Mao, 2024; Ward, 1996).

Among international students, those from mainland China make up the largest proportion (Yang, 2022). Previous research has mainly focused on the intercultural experiences of Chinese students in Anglophone countries, examining educational discrepancies, adaptation strategies, and adaptation patterns (Gu & Maley, 2008; Gu & Usinger, 2021; Qu & Song, 2024; Ye, 2025). Although these studies offer important insights, they contribute to a geographical bias.

In recent years, Southeast Asia has become an alternative study destination for Chinese students. Thailand, for example, has gained popularity due to geographical proximity, affordable tuition fees, a diverse cultural environment, and an increase in international academic programs (An, 2010; Songsathaphorn et al., 2014; Ye, 2020). Many Thai universities now offer English- or Chinese-medium programs to attract students. However, reduced language barriers do not guarantee smooth adaptation. Academic environments often contain teaching methods and implicit norms that differ from those in students' home culture. For instance, although both Thai and Chinese societies value respect for authority, they express this value differently. Teacher–student relationships in Thai classrooms are typically more informal and friendly, whereas in China they tend to be more formal and hierarchical (Huang, 2021; Zheng et al., 2025). These differences may influence students' engagement and expectations. For students accustomed to the Chinese learning environment, adapting to Thai academic culture can present new challenges.

Previous research on Chinese students in Thailand also shows limitations. Beyond the geographical focus, many studies treat culture as a broad category and document only surface-level adjustment issues, such as language barriers, living conditions, and institutional support (Huang, 2021; Sun et al., 2020), or disparities between academic levels (Zheng et al., 2025). Other studies identify predictors of adjustment, such as communication skills, intercultural interaction, and environmental factors (Jiang et al., 2024; Kang et al., 2019; Wenjing & Chayanuvat, 2024). Given the growing number of Chinese students in Thai universities, it is necessary to explore how these students interact with the Thai academic culture through a more specific conceptual framework.

Drawing on Huber and Reynolds's (2014) tripartite conceptualization of culture, this study operationalizes material, social, and subjective culture to examine how Chinese students adapt to and interpret their academic experiences. Two research questions guide the study:

1. To what extent do Chinese students adapt to the material, social, and subjective culture in academic settings at a Thai university?

2. How do Chinese students interpret their adaptation in these cultural dimensions?

This study does not test hypotheses; however, it is expected that Chinese students adapt differently to the three cultural dimensions. Material culture is expected to show the highest level of adaptation, followed by social culture, with subjective culture showing the lowest.

Literature Review

Intercultural adaptation refers to the process by which an individual adjusts to new environments and establishes functional relationships with the host culture (Kim, 2001; Ye, 2025). For international students, intercultural adaptation involves psychological well-being and sociocultural competence (Ward et al., 2001) in both academic and non-academic settings. Several studies (e.g., Gu & Usinger, 2021; Qu & Song, 2024; Ye, 2025) have discussed Chinese students' intercultural adaptation in English-speaking countries, often emphasizing various adjustment issues. Academic adaptation is a particularly important aspect of intercultural adaptation. It encompasses students' ability to meet and deal with academic requirements (Van Rooij et al., 2018) and the strategies they use to respond to academic challenges (Mao, 2024). In this study, we define intercultural academic adaptation as the extent to which Chinese students adapt to material, social, and subjective cultures in a Thai university context.

Classical intercultural adaptation theories provide important foundations for understanding how individuals adjust to new environments, but they have limitations when applied to academic adaptation in higher education. For example, both Berry's (1985) acculturation model and Kim's (2001) integrative theory emphasize psychological aspects. The former focuses on strategies (i.e., integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization), while the latter views adaptation as a stress–adaptation–growth process. However, both theories overlook the impact of different cultural dimensions on students' adaptation experiences. Likewise, the model proposed by Ward et al. (2001) highlights the affective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects of adaptation. Although this offers a multidimensional perspective, the concept of culture remains relatively broad. Therefore, a theoretical framework that clearly defines distinct dimensions of culture is needed to understand international students' academic adaptation experiences.

Huber and Reynolds' (2014) Cultural Framework

Huber and Reynolds' (2014) cultural framework offers a multidimensional perspective for understanding culture. According to this model, culture is

conceptualized as three interconnected dimensions: material culture, social culture, and subjective culture. Material culture refers to the "physical artifacts commonly used by members of a cultural group" (p. 13). It includes tools, goods, food, clothing, and similar objects. Social culture is the "social institutions of the group" (p. 13) and involves language, rules of conduct, cultural symbols, and related practices. Subjective culture consists of the "beliefs, norms, collective memories, attitudes, values, discourses, and practices that group members commonly use as frames of reference for thinking about, understanding, and engaging with the world" (p. 14). Together, these three dimensions provide a coherent perspective for understanding culture at physical, behavioral, and interpretive levels.

The framework has recently been examined by Na Ranong and Byram (2025) in a higher education context. Their study investigated the learning experiences of 14 international students at a Thai university and found that, in academic settings, material, social, and subjective cultures are interconnected and influence one another. In terms of material culture, students noticed the diverse learning spaces at the university. In terms of social culture, teaching methods shifted from lecture-based to collaborative, student-centered, and group-based learning. These two aspects combined to create changes in students' subjective culture, prompting them to redefine "study." However, this study had a small sample size and relied only on interview data. Existing research remains limited regarding the degree of adaptation and the specific challenges students face.

The current study adopts the material, social, and subjective culture framework to understand the intercultural academic adaptation of Chinese students at a Thai university. It is important to note that this framework is not only a classification tool but also an analytical lens. In this context, material culture specifically includes students' use of campus infrastructure, classroom physical environment, learning tools, and academic resources. Social culture includes teacher–student relationships, peer interactions, and learning norms in the classroom. Subjective culture focuses on students' learning concepts, values, and potential changes. Through these specific aspects, this study examines how resources, norms, and value systems work together to shape students' adaptation experiences.

Previous Studies on Chinese Students' Intercultural Adaptation in Thailand

Studies conducted in Thailand have identified various adaptation challenges, such as adjusting to local communication styles, classroom interaction norms, and everyday customs. Sun et al. (2020) examined the challenges Chinese students faced in adjusting to campus life, understanding academic content in Thai or English, and integrating into Thai society. Huang (2021) reported specific

difficulties, such as understanding the English accent of Thai instructors, ineffective group work, and discomfort with customs like removing shoes indoors or the informal proximity between students and instructors. The study also found that Chinese students are more familiar with having tutors to provide ongoing support. At the same time, certain elements of the Thai university environment (e.g., attractive uniforms) encouraged students' cultural engagement. These findings suggest that adaptation is a multidimensional process encompassing both institutional and everyday cultural elements. While these studies highlight diverse challenges of adaptation, they tend to remain descriptive, focusing on surface-level problems rather than underlying cultural mechanisms.

Some studies have focused on group-based differences. Zheng et al. (2025) found that Chinese master's students experienced greater language-related stress, while doctoral students faced role conflict and external pressure. However, this study did not consider how structural or cultural conditions within the university contribute to these patterns, and the connections between individual experiences and institutional and cultural dynamics were not explored.

Other researchers have investigated factors that influence adaptation. For example, Kang et al. (2019) identified five key predictors of Chinese students' adaptation: communication skills, social interaction, intercultural transformation, environmental conditions, and individual characteristics. Wenjing and Chayanuvat (2024) emphasized the importance of language skills and length of stay and found adaptation challenges related to public transportation. Jiang et al. (2024) further developed these findings by highlighting the role of environmental and economic conditions, geographical location, and campus infrastructure. However, these studies rarely address how students interpret their academic experiences. Adaptation is often treated as a set of variables rather than an interconnected process shaped by material, social, and value-based dimensions.

Methods

Research Design

This study used a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017). In this approach, a survey was first administered to collect quantitative data, followed by interviews to obtain qualitative insights. Such a design allows for deeper interpretation of complex issues and increases the validity of findings through triangulation (Tracy, 2010). In this study, the quantitative phase identified students' levels of adaptation across material, social, and subjective cultural dimensions. The qualitative phase then explained these patterns considering students' lived experiences. The study did not aim to compare differences between year levels; rather, it examined Chinese

students as a whole and explored their academic adaptation across the three cultural dimensions.

Within the quantitative phase, descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to describe the degree of participants' adaptation. For the qualitative phase, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) was employed to examine adaptation experiences in depth. This method involves systematically identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning. As an exploratory and inductive approach, it enabled a nuanced understanding of students' perspectives. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, the study provided a more comprehensive account of Chinese students' intercultural academic experiences at a Thai university.

Research Context and Participants

The university began enrolling Chinese students in the early 2000s. It offers an international learning environment in which Chinese students encounter a range of cultural elements. According to official statistics, 357 Chinese students were enrolled in the 2024 academic year, which corresponded to the period of data collection. In the quantitative phase, convenience sampling was used because the target population was located within the same college and easily accessible. All Chinese students were invited to participate, resulting in 290 valid responses (172 males, 118 females), an 81.2% response rate. Participants represented various fields and years of study, with most in their first or second year. Consistent with the research questions, this study did not conduct subgroup comparisons.

Twelve students were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) for follow-up interviews. Selection criteria included: (a) completion of the questionnaire, (b) willingness and ability to share personal experiences, and (c) differing levels of adaptation. These participants provided deeper insight into how students interpret and navigate their academic experiences within the Thai university context.

Research Instrument

Quantitative instrument: Questionnaire

Based on the framework by Huber and Reynolds (2014), a 27-item questionnaire was developed (Appendix A). The questionnaire covers three dimensions: material culture (e.g., campus facilities, digital learning tools), social culture (e.g., teacher–student interaction, classroom rules), and subjective culture (e.g., academic values, attitudes toward teaching and learning methods). Table 1 shows sample items from each dimension. The items were rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater adaptation.

To enhance content validity, three experts assessed item-objective congruence (IOC). Based on their feedback, several items were revised to improve alignment with the research objectives and enhance statement clarity. The questionnaire was translated into Chinese, and the translation was reviewed by an expert for linguistic accuracy. A pilot study was conducted with a small number of Chinese students to evaluate the questionnaire's usability and completion time. To ensure internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated. All three dimensions showed acceptable reliability: .87 for material culture, .92 for social culture, and .88 for subjective culture.

Table 1
Example items for each dimension in the questionnaire

Dimension	No. of Items	Sample Statement
Material Culture	9	I have adapted to the classroom facilities (e.g. air conditioning, seating, projectors) at my Thai university.
Social Culture	9	I have adapted to communicating with my teachers in a culturally appropriate way (e.g., explaining my needs, asking for a make-up exam).
Subjective Culture	9	I have adapted to diverse cultural values about learning, including independent thinking, classroom participation, and self-expression.

Qualitative instrument: Interview guidelines

A semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B) was developed. To enhance clarity and relevance, three experts reviewed the protocol, and minor revisions were made to improve wording. The protocol was then translated into Chinese and tested with students to ensure its suitability.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed standard research ethics procedures. It received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of Thammasat University (No. SSTU-EC 158/2567). The researcher informed all students that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Withdrawing from the study would not affect students' academic performance or their relationship with the university. The researcher also explained the purpose, methods, and use of the data to the participants. Participants' answers remained anonymous and were used only for research purposes. No personal data were collected.

Research Procedure

The questionnaire was presented in Google Forms. A link to the questionnaire was sent to online class groups. Students also received detailed instructions

and a consent form. They had two weeks to complete the questionnaire. After data collection, the researcher reviewed the answers to identify interview candidates. Twelve students were contacted via DingTalk (a communication app used by Chinese students). Before the interviews, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study as well as their rights.

Individual interviews were conducted in Mandarin to ensure clear and comfortable expression. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. To support accurate understanding, follow-up questions such as "Do you mean that ..." were asked. Participants were asked to review their transcripts. All personal data were anonymized and used exclusively for research purposes.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using a statistical program. Descriptive statistics were calculated, including frequencies, percentages, means, and 95% confidence intervals. To answer the research questions, the analysis focused on general adaptation patterns rather than group comparisons. For each cultural dimension and sub-dimension, means were calculated and interpreted according to Best and Kahn's (1998) five-level scale: very low, low, moderate, high, and very high. Higher means indicated greater adaptation. To define the ranges of interpretation, the five-point Likert scale was divided into five equal intervals, each representing a uniform section of the scale (e.g., 1.00–1.80 = very low, 1.81–2.60 = low, etc.). This ensured that each level of adaptation corresponded to an equal portion of the response range. The width of each class interval was calculated as (5-1)/5 = 0.8. The interpretation scale is presented in Table 2. For example, a mean of 3.87 falls within the "high" range (3.41–4.20), indicating that participants reported a high level of adaptation in the corresponding dimension.

Table 2

Interpretation of Mean Values Regarding Intercultural Adaptation

Score range	Intercultural adaptation level
4.21 - 5.00	Very high
3.41 - 4.20	High
2.61 - 3.40	Moderate
1.81 - 2.60	Low
1.00 - 1.80	Very low

Qualitative Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This approach enables a systematic investigation of meaning patterns across the three cultural dimensions. The process included familiarizing with the

data, generating codes, grouping codes into categories, and refining categories into themes. Coding was performed manually using color-coded Word documents with comments. However, inter-rater reliability may be limited, as a single researcher did the coding. Themes were checked for coherence and supported by illustrative quotations from participants. Although the results cannot be generalized, they offer insights into students' academic experiences in an intercultural context.

To increase the reliability of the qualitative analysis, the coding and themes were reviewed and discussed with an experienced colleague familiar with the Chinese students at the research site. This peer debriefing process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) contributed to the consistency and credibility of the interpretation. Additionally, reflection notes (Creswell & Poth, 2016) were kept throughout the analysis process to minimize potential researcher bias. The lack of multiple coders is acknowledged as a limitation; however, peer debriefing and reflection were employed to help mitigate this limitation.

Results and Discussion

To answer the research questions (a) to what extent Chinese students adapt to material, social, and subjective culture in academic settings at a Thai university, and (b) how Chinese students interpret their adaptation in these cultural dimensions, the results and discussion are structured as follows. First, the general levels of adaptation in different cultural dimensions are presented. The three cultural dimensions are then discussed respectively, beginning with quantitative results followed by qualitative analysis.

Overall Adaptation in the Academic Settings

Table 3 shows the mean scores (M) and 95% confidence intervals (CI) for each cultural dimension. Participants reported a high level of adaptation to material culture and social culture, but a moderate level of adaptation to subjective culture. To facilitate a more detailed understanding, Tables 4 to 6 present the sub-dimensions within each cultural dimension. These are explained in the following sections.

Table 3
The Overall Adaptation to the Material, Social, and Subjective Culture

Dimensions	Mean	95% CI	Intercultural adaptation level
Material culture	3.87	3.79, 3.94	High
Social culture	3.85	3.80, 3.97	High
Subjective culture	3.35	3.26, 3.44	Moderate

Adaptation to Material Culture in Academic Contexts

As Table 4 shows, adaptation was highest for digital learning tools and the campus environment, followed by the use of study spaces, classroom facilities, and library services. Many Thai learning platforms offer image-based user interfaces and multiple language options, which are easy for digitally native Generation Z students to navigate. While previous studies (e.g., Wenjing & Chayanuvat, 2024) primarily emphasized the importance of language proficiency, this study also highlights the role of familiarity with technology in student adaptation. Likewise, the Thai campus blends modern design with traditional architecture, such as Thai-style gardens and pavilions. This landscape creates a visually appealing and culturally enriching environment. As Huang (2021) noted, such features can positively influence the emotional well-being and cultural curiosity of Chinese students.

Students have also adapted well to the learning spaces. The university offers multifunctional learning areas such as cafes, group study rooms, and open spaces. Such flexible spaces have been shown to promote student interaction and creative engagement (Jiang et al., 2024; Na Ranong & Byram, 2025). The somewhat lower average scores for classroom facilities and library services, however, may indicate difficulties with specific equipment or resources. Previous studies have shown a similar pattern. Sun et al. (2020) found that Chinese students in Thailand experienced problems with academic conditions such as teaching environments and language resources, as these often did not meet their expectations.

Table 4
Adaptation of Material Culture

Sub-Dimensions	Mean	Intercultural Adaptation Level
Campus Environment	4.02	High
Digital Learning Tools	4.11	High
Classroom Facilities	3.79	High
Library Services	3.62	High
Use of Study Spaces	3.83	High
Material Culture in Total	3.87	High

Overall, the results suggest that students' adaptation to material culture is primarily influenced by factors such as usability, visual experience, and functional diversity. These findings highlight the need for Thai universities to improve these aspects to further enhance the learning experience of international students. To better understand how students interpret their experiences with material culture in an academic context, qualitative interview data were analyzed. Two themes emerged.

Theme 1: Balance between Functional Adequacy and Physical Discomfort

The analysis of the interview data revealed that students had mixed feelings about the learning environment. Many of them complained about the small seating, the insufficient number of tables, and the very cold air conditioning. Participant 3 noted, "The chairs are too small and fixed to the tables. I have more space in China." Participant 6 said, "I'm tall and I always get stuck in the chair. It makes me very uncomfortable and I can't concentrate on the class." Participant 9 reported, "The air conditioning is so cold. I even caught a cold once!" Although some students complained about the classroom facilities, others emphasized their functionality. For example, Participant 1 said, "The classrooms are quite clean, and there's internet and projectors." Participant 7 agreed, "Basically, it's sufficient for learning."

The students also expressed mixed experiences with the library. On the one hand, they praised its functionality. Participant 2 mentioned, "The library has meeting rooms for students. We can use them to prepare presentations." Participant 5 added, "I love the sofas. They are so comfortable that I can take a nap there." On the other hand, some students reported negative experiences. Participant 11 was confused by the library rule that prohibited heating water. She said, "Once, the librarian stopped me from boiling water. But it was cold in the library." Furthermore, others reported difficulties such as limited language skills, which made it harder for them to use the library services.

Regarding the campus environment, students shared similar views. Overall, they appreciated the green and culturally appealing landscape. Participant 4 said, "It's very beautiful. I like the Thai-style buildings and all the greenery." However, Participant 5 noted that the buildings were constantly being renovated. Previous work by Jiang et al. (2024) argued that the infrastructure could restrict international students' satisfaction.

In summary, students' experiences are influenced by both functional adequacy and physical comfort. Most facilities meet their learning needs, but certain aspects such as furniture, temperature, and accessibility can still cause discomfort. While previous studies have emphasized infrastructural and environmental challenges (e.g., Jiang et al., 2024; Kang et al., 2019; Wenjing & Chayanuvat, 2024), this study adds that persistent micro-level inconveniences may continue to negatively affect students' learning experiences. Universities are encouraged to optimize these aspects to support better academic participation.

Theme 2: Negotiation of Digital Learning and New Technologies

Participants generally noted that learning in Thailand is highly digitized. Teachers frequently provide electronic textbooks and slides. Participant 11 said,

"They give us digital learning materials." Some students expressed concerns. "Sometimes I read materials on my phone or iPad, but it's easy to get distracted," remarked Participant 3. Participant 10 added, "The college doesn't have printed textbooks. To me, it's the same as if we don't have any textbooks at all." In addition to e-learning materials, the students also mentioned digital platforms. Besides Chinese applications (e.g., TeacherMate, DingTalk), they also encountered new platforms such as Google, Kahoot, and Pearson. Most students found both Chinese and foreign platforms user-friendly. Difficulties arose more from a lack of familiarity than from complexity. Participant 12 said, "Everyone's using ChatGPT recently ... I'm going to give it a try now." Participant 10 reported, "At first, I was a bit hesitant to use Google, mainly because it was new to me." Participant 1 expressed a similar sentiment: "I was unsure about using Pearson at first, but after a few weeks, I found it quite practical and am much more confident now."

The interviews revealed several characteristics of students' digital learning. Students experience a hybrid form of digital cultural adaptation. This aligns with the observation by Na Ranong and Byram (2025) that international students adapt their learning behavior to local academic expectations. Digital platforms do not represent a "skill threshold" for students but rather a "familiarity threshold." Their technology preferences depend primarily on familiarity rather than cultural background. Technological and communicative competence supports a smoother academic transition (Kang et al., 2019).

In summary, the interview results largely confirm the quantitative findings. Students generally had positive experiences with digital tools and learning materials and used both familiar and new digital platforms. These experiences reflect a shift from passive to more active use. The students explored and applied new tools, demonstrating growing digital competence and confidence. To promote the internationalization of students, universities are therefore encouraged to integrate diverse local and international platforms into their teaching. This engagement with digital media can facilitate students' digital adaptability and strengthen their skills and confidence.

Adaptation to Social Culture in Academic Settings

As Table 5 shows, students reported a high level of adaptation to academic norms, teacher–student relationships, peer interaction, and academic expectations, but a moderate level of adaptation to academic engagement. Their prior learning experiences in China contributed to these results. The Chinese education system is characterized by hierarchical and teacher-centered instruction, which made it easier for students to adhere to rules and show respect to their instructors during their studies in Thailand. It should be noted that most of the instructors and students in this study have a Chinese-speaking background.

This feature likely contributes to a high degree of adaptability in teacher–student relationships and peer interaction. However, it does not necessarily mean that students develop general intercultural adaptability in these two areas.

Regarding academic expectations and engagement, while these exhibit different levels of adaptation, the underlying reasons appear similar. Students view studying in Thailand as an alternative to the highly competitive universities in China. However, they found that the academic demands in Thailand did not fully meet their expectations. This discrepancy may negatively affect student motivation and engagement. Furthermore, language barriers also hinder their participation, despite the university's diverse range of academic activities. As Zheng et al. (2025) argued, the academic motivation and external pressures faced by Chinese students vary depending on their educational and personal contexts, influencing their participation in class.

Table 5
Social Culture Adaptation in Academic Settings

Sub-Dimensions	Mean	Intercultural Adaptation Level
Teacher-Student Relationships	3.98	High
Academic Norms	4.05	High
Academic Expectations	3.88	High
Peer Interaction	3.98	High
Academic Engagement	3.39	Moderate
Social Culture in Total	3.85	High

The results mentioned above reflect patterns described around material culture. Although students generally adapted well, minor challenges persisted. Furthermore, adaptation around social culture is uneven and requires continuous negotiation between the familiar and the new. The accessibility of instructors and the use of Chinese at the university facilitate adaptation (Huang, 2021; Kang et al., 2019). However, students' limited English and Thai proficiency restricts deeper engagement with the subject matter. The expectation of active participation in Thai classes requires additional adaptation from students. It may therefore be helpful for the university to clearly inform students about academic requirements and expectations in Thailand to support their adjustment. To better understand students' interpretations of social culture adaptation in academic settings, qualitative interview data were analyzed. Two themes emerged.

Theme 1: Managing Intercultural Teacher-Student Interactions

Most students found their lecturers approachable, helpful, and friendly. Participant 2 reported, "My teachers are very helpful. They even buy us small gifts to motivate us." Others, however, spoke of differing communication expectations. Participant 7 said, "I'm used to communicating with my teachers via WeChat, but I've noticed that they prefer email. One of my teachers even insists that we communicate by email. It's a bit inconvenient, but not a big problem." Participant 8 expressed a similar sentiment: "My lecturer places great importance on meeting deadlines. At first, I didn't know anything about it until she suddenly stopped collecting assignments. I was shocked and even thought the lecturer was being nosy." These examples illustrate discrepancies between communication and academic expectations. In China, students are accustomed to informal communication, such as verbal agreements and instant messaging. Thai universities, on the other hand, often prefer more formal, institutionalized communication methods such as email and strictly enforce deadlines. If students are unaware of these differences, it can lead to maladjustment.

In addition, some students expressed hesitancy when approaching their teachers. Participant 10 said, "Sometimes I don't dare to make contact. I think it might bother them." Participant 3 mentioned, "I'm not sure what to say or ask." These responses suggest that while students generally perceive instructors as friendly and approachable, their assessment may remain superficial. In practice, students experience hesitancy and uncertainty when interacting with instructors. They are unsure how to establish effective academic interactions or seek help. In Chinese educational culture, teacher–student relationships are more hierarchical and distant. This creates uncertainty among students about appropriate topics and the level of interaction expected. Consequently, students must adapt to new communication expectations and interaction methods within an intercultural academic environment.

Theme 2: Adaptation to Collaborative Learning and Peer Interactions

Thai universities offer a range of collaborative learning opportunities, such as group discussions, situational performances, and module presentations. Students' opinions on these activities varied. Some focused on the advantages, such as promoting participation and interaction, reducing loneliness, and increasing motivation for learning. As Participant 1 said, "Group work helped me to think more deeply and contribute my strengths to the group. I also built stronger interpersonal relationships." Learning became more effective when participants worked with peers. Others, however, expressed concerns. They felt group work could be "problematic" or "inefficient" because it was often accompanied by poor communication, conflicting opinions, and the presence of "free riders." Participant 5 shared, "Sometimes group discussions stray

from the topic." Participant 6 added that she often completed tasks alone because her team members did not respond. Participant 10 also reported feeling ignored in the group: "Interaction isn't really my thing." Overall, some students recognized the benefits of collaborative learning, while others reported difficulties. Introverted students also had trouble contributing to group work, which increased their anxiety.

Furthermore, students described their strategies for dealing with "free riders." Most of them tolerated the behavior to maintain group harmony or silently avoided the free rider in future collaborations. A few mentioned that they would approach the instructor to explain the situation. These strategies may reflect the influence of Chinese collectivist values, as students place more value on social cohesion and group harmony than on direct confrontation.

The above results are consistent with previous research. International students were often surprised and unprepared for the frequency and central importance of group-based learning at Thai universities (Na Ranong & Byram, 2025). These experiences sometimes led to discomfort and confusion due to unfamiliar learning expectations. Nevertheless, some students appreciated this learning approach because it improved their interpersonal and communication skills. Successful group work often depends on mutual cooperation, clear communication, and students' willingness to adapt to local conditions.

In summary, the quantitative data showed that students are generally well integrated into the social culture. The interviews, however, revealed potential challenges, such as communication uncertainty, differing expectations, and difficulties in collaboration. Values from the students' home culture, such as respect for authority and the importance of group harmony, shaped their interaction preferences. The results also indicated that students actively participated in meeting new academic requirements. While maintaining familiar relationship norms, they selectively adopted new practices, such as the use of formal communication channels and the management of group dynamics. This targeted adaptation suggests a negotiated process rather than passive conformity.

Adaptation to Subjective Culture in Academic Settings

As shown in Table 6, the overall adaptation in subjective culture was moderate. Compared to the dimensions of material and social culture, subjective culture showed a lower level of adaptation. Specifically, students reported relatively high adaptation regarding their attitudes toward language use, attitudes toward student–teacher relationships, and beliefs about academic success. Adaptation to attitudes toward teaching and learning, as well as learning values and beliefs, was moderate. The greater variability among its sub-dimensions suggests uneven adaptation to value-related aspects.

Table 6
Subjective Cultural Adaptation in Academic Settings

Sub-Dimensions	Mean	Intercultural Adaptation Level
Learning Values and Beliefs	2.91	Moderate
Attitudes towards Teaching and Learning	3.36	Moderate
Beliefs about Academic Success	3.43	High
Attitudes towards Student-Teacher Relationships	3.51	High
Attitudes toward Language Use	3.55	High
Subjective Culture in Total	3.35	Moderate

The high score regarding attitudes toward language use likely reflects students' awareness of the need to use English or Thai in the Thai university context, even though they still prefer using Chinese in everyday communication to avoid pressure. Teachers also observed that students frequently inquire about supplementary English or Thai courses, indicating a desire to improve their language skills. This pattern aligns with findings by Qu and Song (2024), who reported that Chinese students in Australia participated more actively in discussions when speaking Chinese.

Furthermore, changes in attitudes and beliefs require sustained engagement and time. Coming from an exam-oriented and teacher-centered education system, these students may find it challenging to adapt to Thai academic culture, which emphasizes student participation, critical thinking, and learner autonomy. Na Ranong and Byram (2025) similarly noted that international students in Thailand experienced a gradual shift from lecture-based to student-centered learning, with classroom practices and peer interactions shaping this development.

Overall, value-related changes occur more slowly and require deeper cognitive engagement than behavioral adjustments (Berry, 1985; Kim, 2001; Ward et al., 2001). This dimension reflects an ongoing negotiation between inherited learning orientations and new academic expectations. To better understand how students interpret their adaptation to subjective culture, interview data were analyzed, and two themes emerged.

Theme 1: Developing Learning Values and Reconceptualizing Academic Success

The university curriculum emphasizes competencies such as independent and critical thinking. Through competency-oriented tasks, students gradually developed an understanding of these abstract concepts. They viewed independent thinking as expressing one's own opinion, moving away from passive conformity, and not relying excessively on AI. They also highlighted the importance of questioning and exploring new perspectives. Students noted that many courses

integrated critical thinking and promoted innovation. Classroom interactions and instructional design shaped these shifts in subjective culture. However, many students still struggled to apply these concepts in practice. Participant 10 stated, "Actually, I don't know how to be innovative in my life." This difficulty may reflect the idea that cognitive adaptation precedes behavioral change (Qu & Song, 2024).

Regarding students' understanding of academic success, only a few defined it narrowly as completing a degree on time or passing required courses. More commonly, students demonstrated a broader, more developmental conception of success. Several emphasized the importance of applying knowledge to real-world situations. Participant 6 said, "I used to think success meant good grades. Now, it means applying what I've learned." This suggests a shift from a grade-oriented view to a skills-oriented perspective. Others linked success to personal growth or described it as an ongoing learning process rather than an outcome. These reflections indicate that curricula and teaching practices can influence students' learning beliefs over time.

Theme 2: Dealing with AI and Academic Integrity in the Learning

Artificial intelligence (AI) is widely used in Thai higher education, and several recent studies have examined students' perspectives on AI-supported academic writing (e.g., Tantivejakul et al., 2024). The present study shows that students' engagement with AI is not merely technical; it also reflects evolving values and beliefs related to learning and academic integrity.

Students generally held positive attitudes toward AI and recognized the need to use such tools appropriately. Participant 11 remarked, "Teachers can't answer my questions all the time. AI supports my studies." Others emphasized independent thinking. Participant 12 explained, "I first develop a basic structure with my own thoughts and then use AI to refine it. AI increases efficiency but should not replace human ideas." Some students worried that excessive reliance on AI might weaken their thinking skills. Overall, students were developing personalized strategies for using AI while trying to avoid over-dependence. These findings align with Ma et al. (2024), who argue that students perceive AI not simply as a tool but as an extension of their learning processes.

In summary, the findings illustrate how Chinese students navigate material, social, and subjective cultural dimensions within the academic context. These three dimensions are interconnected yet distinct. Material resources provide foundational support; interactions with instructors and peers shape daily academic experiences; and together these factors influence students' evolving understandings of teaching and learning. Students are not passive recipients of their new learning environment—they actively engage with Thai academic culture.

Unlike many studies in English-speaking contexts, which often attribute Chinese students' challenges to limited language proficiency, insufficient academic ability, or lack of critical thinking (Qu & Song, 2024), this study identifies several distinct patterns in a non-Western setting. Students reported difficulties related to physical classroom conditions—an issue rarely addressed in Western literature. Although Chinese students are sometimes portrayed as passive learners (Leask & Carroll, 2011), this study found that they actively managed material constraints, language-mediated challenges, and unfamiliar subjective norms. It also showed that the three cultural dimensions interact and jointly shape students' academic experiences.

Conclusion and Implications

This study adapted the framework of Huber and Reynolds (2014) to examine the academic adaptation of Chinese students at a Thai university. Quantitative findings showed that adaptation to material culture was highest, followed by social and subjective culture. Qualitative results helped explain these patterns. In terms of material culture, students adapted well to physical facilities and digital tools despite some challenges. Their growing confidence in using learning technologies supported their broader adaptation. At the social level, students appreciated supportive teacher–student relationships and collaborative learning opportunities, while also encountering challenges related to differing communication norms and uneven group participation. Subjectively, students demonstrated emerging understandings of key academic concepts such as critical thinking, along with evolving perspectives on academic success and responsible AI use.

This study has several implications for researchers, instructors, administrators, and policymakers in Thailand and other Asian hubs. Theoretically, it provides a multidimensional operationalization of academic adaptation, extending Huber and Reynolds's (2014) framework to a non-Western context and demonstrating how material, social, and subjective cultural factors jointly shape students' adjustment experiences. It also offers additional empirical evidence that complements recent work by Na Ranong and Byram (2025). Practically, these context-specific insights can help instructors and administrators design targeted support mechanisms, such as collaborative learning programs and training in AI-supported learning. Policymakers could further assist by allocating funding and developing strategies for recruiting and supporting international students.

This study has three limitations. First, although the framework by Huber and Reynolds (2014) provides a strong foundation, the questionnaire and interview guide were created specifically for this study and have not been validated in other contexts. Second, the quantitative data rely on students'

self-reports, which may be influenced by social desirability bias, particularly in the social and subjective domains. Third, the study was conducted at a single university, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research should include multiple sites to enhance the applicability of the instrument. Longitudinal designs could track how adaptation changes over time, and comparative studies across institutions, programs, or regions would deepen our understanding. Finally, future research should test specific interventions to determine their effectiveness in supporting students' academic adaptation.

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Appendices
Appendix A Questionnaire

General Instruction

This questionnaire is designed to explore your academic adaptation experiences as a Chinese undergraduate student studying in Thailand. It consists of two sections. Please answer each question honestly. Your responses will remain strictly confidential and used solely for academic research purposes. There are no right or wrong answers.

Section 1: Personal Information

Please fill in the following information.

1. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Prefer not to say
2. Academic Year: ☐ Year 1 ☐ Year 2 ☐ Year 3 ☐ Year 4
3. Program:
   ☐ International Business
   ☐ Finance and Accounting
   ☐ Tourism Management
   ☐ Art and Design
4. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up individual interview?
   ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, please leave your DingTalk ID: _____

Section 2: Academic Adaptation

Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements, based on your academic experiences in Thailand. Use the scale below:

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

Material culture

1. I am comfortable with the campus architecture at my Thai university.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
2. The physical environment (e.g., green spaces, study areas) helps me adapt to academic life in Thailand.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
3. I have adapted to using digital platforms (e.g., TeacherMate, DingTalk, Google Docs) for academic purposes.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
4. I am comfortable with paperless learning methods such as digital textbooks and online assignments.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

5. I have adjusted to using digital devices (e.g., tablets) instead of printed materials for my studies.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
6. I have adapted to the classroom facilities (e.g., air conditioning, seating, projectors) at my Thai university.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
7. The library facilities at my Thai university support my academic needs.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
8. I have learned how to locate academic resources such as textbooks and study materials in Thailand.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
9. I have adapted to using the available study spaces on campus for academic work.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

Social culture

1. I have adapted to communicating with my teachers in a culturally appropriate way, such as explaining my needs or asking for a make-up exam.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
2. I have adapted to the social norms in academic spaces, such as being punctual and keeping quiet in classrooms or libraries.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
3. I have adapted to institutional academic expectations, such as attending classes regularly and meeting assignment deadlines at my Thai university.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
4. I have adapted to academic interactions with teachers and peers, such as participating in discussions or working in groups.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
5. I have adapted to seeking and receiving academic support from both teachers and classmates as an international student.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
6. I have adapted to participating in academic seminars, student groups, or extracurricular learning activities.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
7. I have adapted to collaborating with other students in academic settings, such as working together on group assignments or class discussions.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
8. I have adapted to classroom academic expectations regarding participation, assignment styles, and learning tasks in the Thai classroom.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
9. I have adapted to the university's dress code, including wearing a uniform and following detailed rules during exam periods.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

Subjective culture

1. I have adapted to diverse cultural values about learning, including independent thinking, classroom participation, and self-expression.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
2. I have adapted my attitudes towards teaching methods used in my Thai university, such as group discussion, independent research, and interactive lectures.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
3. I have adjusted my beliefs to align more with Thai educational values, such as student autonomy and open discussion.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
4. I have adjusted my beliefs about what constitutes academic success to align with the evaluation values, such as focusing more on participation and coursework than final exams.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
5. I have developed a positive attitude toward the more relaxed classroom atmosphere in Thailand, such as informal teacher-student interactions and flexible participation.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
6. I have developed a positive attitude toward using English or Thai for academic communication at my Thai university.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
7. I have adapted my attitudes toward learning methods, such as group work and independent study.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
8. I have adapted to new teaching and learning values in Thailand, which have changed the way I approach my studies.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5
9. I have adapted my attitudes toward student-teacher relationships, such as becoming more comfortable with informal interaction and open communication.
   ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5

This is the end of the questionnaire. Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Appendix B Interview Guide

Instruction

This semi-structured guide explored Chinese students' academic adaptation at a Thai university. Questions are grouped by material, social, and subjective culture. Probes (optional follow-up prompts) appear in italics.

1. Material culture

Main question
How do you feel about the learning facilities and tools at this university (e.g., classrooms, textbooks, online platforms)? Do they support your study needs?

Probes
1. *Were any of these tools or resources new to you? How did you adapt to them?*
2. *Did you face any difficulties using these tools or platforms (e.g., Google, university student system)?*
3. *Have you changed your study habits or methods because of these tools?*
4. *Compared with Chinese universities, what do you like or dislike about the material resources here?*

2. Social culture

Main question
How have you experienced social interactions in academic contexts (e.g., with teachers or classmates)? What differences from China have you had to adjust to?

Probes
1. *How do you feel about participating in group work or class discussions?*
2. *Do you feel comfortable asking questions or giving feedback in class?*
3. *Have your relationships with peers or teachers influenced your learning?*
4. *Have you developed any new strategies to communicate or cooperate effectively?*

3. Subjective culture

Main question
Have you noticed any differences in educational values or expectations (e.g., about effort, deadlines, academic honesty) between Thailand and China? How do they influence your learning?

Probes

1. *How do your teachers put ideas such as independent thinking, critical thinking, or innovation into practice?*
2. *Do you clearly understand these concepts and how do you apply them yourself?*
3. *Have your beliefs about academic success changed since studying here? What do you now consider real academic success?*
4. *How do you view the use of AI tools in coursework?*
5. *Where do you see the boundary between "appropriate use" and "academic dishonesty"?*