



# Leading private Chinese schools in northern Thailand: Contextual challenges facing school principals and their perceptions toward their leadership roles

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## Abstract

Private Chinese schools have existed in northern Thailand since the late 1950s to provide the descendants of the Isolated Army of Kuomintang (KMT) who retreated from Yunnan Province of China to northern Thailand in 1954 with opportunities to learn their ancestors' language and culture to inherit their Chinese bloodline. However, these schools encounter increasing contextual challenges. This study sought to investigate contextual leadership challenges and school principals' perceptions on their leadership roles in these schools. The study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured in-depth interviews with a sample of school principals from nine private Chinese schools in Chiangrai and Chiangmai provinces. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that participating school principals encountered omnibus and discrete contextual challenges. The former included Chinese-culture preservation, school legalization, financial constraints and political crisis. The latter included dealing with academic problems, teacher recruitment, and interaction with local communities. The participating school principals also reported that they had manifold challenging leadership roles to play and various levels of responsibilities to shoulder, but they all took great pride in their role as leaders of private Chinese schools in remote areas in northern Thailand.

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## Introduction

Private Chinese schools have been in existence for more than 70 years in Thai-Yunnanese villages in northern Thailand. The original founders of these schools were the Isolated Army of Kuomintang (KMT) who retreated from

Yunnan Province of China to northern Thailand in 1954. These settlers have since been called Thai-Yunnanese. Several factors contributed to the establishment of these schools. First, no Thai schools accepted the children of the Isolated Army due to their refugee status, and they therefore decided to establish their own schools to provide basic education for their children (Huang, 2010). Second, all the refugees were from China and had strong emotional attachment to their original Chinese bloodline,

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hence, they made decisions to establish schools to preserve their Chinese identity (Chen, 2014). Third, they thoroughly understood the importance of education for their children because their children would be allowed to study in Taiwanese universities if they could complete their secondary education in Thailand (Jin, 2016).

There are approximately 110 such schools in northern Thailand with a student population of about 22,000. These schools are different from other schools in Thailand in many ways. First, these schools are independent, and Thai educational authorities have no right of jurisdictions over them. Second, the schools are run and managed by local Thai-Yunnanese. In addition, these schools have been involved in the open and secret political wrestling match between China and Taiwan due to the historical reasons (Dong, 2019).

Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that research on these schools has not kept pace with the rapid-changing context in northern Thailand. Yang (2018) rightly states that very little is known about leadership practices and challenges in these schools. Furthermore, despite the rapid expansion of these schools in recent years, little attention has been given to them as a potential area of enquiry. This research paucity can be problematic because it can possibly lead to misunderstanding of what has happened in these schools and open the door to misconceptions and prejudices. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to explore the contextual challenges facing school principals and give voice to the perceptions and

perspectives of the school principals with regard to their roles and associated challenges.

This study had two objectives as follows.

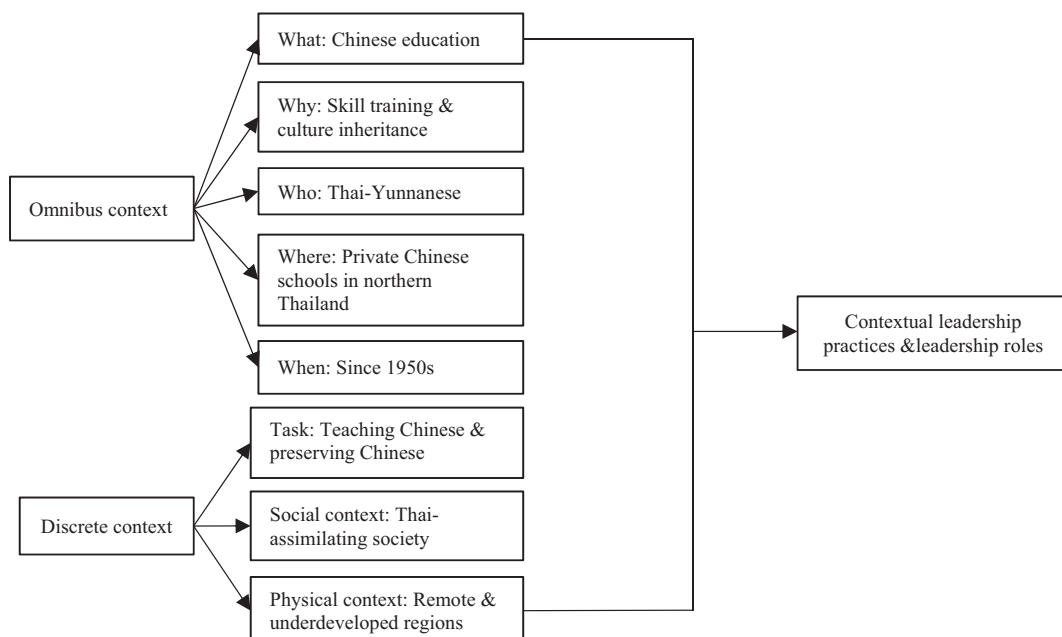
1. To investigate the contextual leadership challenges facing school principals of private Chinese schools in northern Thailand.

2. To analyze the perceptions of school principals in these schools about their roles and leadership practices.

The conceptual framework of this study is shown in Figure 1 as follows.

## Literature Review

This study employed Johns (2006) categorical framework for context as its theoretical framework. Johns (2006) conceptualizes context into two levels: omnibus context and discrete context. The omnibus context offers necessary information regarding elements of a given context (i.e., what, why, who, where and when), while discrete context includes the task, social and physical context as its salient dimensions (Johns, 2006). Two levels of context can nest and interact with each other to influence leadership practice and school performance (Johns, 2006). Therefore, when leading schools, school principals should make necessary changes according to particular contextual factors to make their leadership effective and successful (Day & Sammons, 2013; Przybylski, Chen, & Hu, 2018).



**Figure 1** The conceptual framework of this study

Clark and Wildy (2010) propose a conceptual framework about key elements of contexts for school leaders to consider when dealing with the complexity of local contexts. They argue, to lead school successfully and effectively in a specific context, school leaders need to (1) understand the complexities of their context, including people, problems, school culture, and local community; (2) have knowledge, understanding and skills to deal with a range of complex interactions with students, staff, parents, and community members; (3) be familiar with legal environment of the local context, including risk management, financial accounting, facility management, child safety, workplace health and safety; (4) have a well-defined sense of moral purposes and leader traits (moral characteristics), which are at the core of principal's work and leadership practices. (Clark & Wildy, 2010)

Literature on contextual challenges facing school principals shows school principals have different requirements and responsibilities to fulfill due to different contexts. In Raka's study (2015) of transformational leadership roles between principals and staff in rural private schools of Papua New Guinea, she reports that financial challenge is the major cause for other organizational challenges such as overcrowded classrooms and inadequate teaching and learning resources, teacher-workload, aging infrastructure. In the context of private faith schools, due to the special values and beliefs, the major contextual challenge for school principals is that they have to integrate school general education with particular values and beliefs to strengthen their religious identity and specific culture. Hammad and Shah (2019) indicate in their study of the challenges facing head teachers of private Muslim schools in the UK that the schools are required to provide Muslim children with a learning environment based on Islamic values and

beliefs. The same has been noted with regard to Christian schools in Australia. In the study of perceptions and practices of school leaders in Christian schools, Prior (2018) finds that the principals have to integrate the particular beliefs, value and culture of the Christian community through all aspects of school education.

## Methodology

In view of the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative case study was employed to investigate and understand the contextual challenges facing school principals and their perceptions about their leadership practices and to gain a deep understanding about the real local situation and problems of private Chinese schools. The reason to use the case study approach is that it allows in-depth, multi-faceted explorations of complicated issues in their real-life settings (Crowe et al., 2011).

## Key Informants

Six school principals from private Chinese schools in Chiangrai province and three school principals from private Chinese schools in Chiangmai province in northern Thailand were chosen as key informants. Purposive criterion sampling was used to identify and select information-rich school principals. The criteria for selecting were: (1) school principals should have at least ten years of working experience; (2) some school principals came from large schools; (3) some school principals came from small schools; (4) school principals' schools were located in remote mountainous areas; and (5) school principals' schools were located in downtown areas.

The following Table 1 shows background information of the participating school principals.

**Table 1** Background information of the participating school principals

Principal	Gender	Age	Years of Working	Educational level	Responsibilities
A	Male	46	28	High school	Managing, leading & developing schools
B	Female	56	36	High school	
C	Male	46	32	High school	
D	Male	42	25	Jr. middle school	
E	Female	38	19	High school	
F	Male	40	25	High school	
G	Male	51	31	Jr. middle school	
H	Male	50	29	High school	
I	Female	45	26	Jr. middle school	

### *Data Collection Instruments and Data Collection Process*

In-depth interviews, non-participants observations and document study were used to collect data. In-depth interviews were used with school principals to explore contextual leadership challenges facing them and to elicit their perceptions toward these challenges and their leadership roles. Non-participant observations were conducted to observe how the schools were managed. Documents such as school journals, official documents and textbooks were carefully studied to search for potential clues that could be used to identify the causes of school problems. Interview questions and observation protocols were validated by experts in the field of Chinese education. The use of collected documents were also approved by them.

To collect the data, the researchers first obtained necessary permission from the Institutional Review Board of the university where the researchers affiliate to. Second, the nine key schools were determined by contacting and discussing with James who is both an educational expert and a school principal of a private Chinese school in Mae Saidistrict. Third, recruitment of the key informants was initiated by contacting the school principals to get their consent. After receiving their approval, the researchers approached them and interviewed them in depth. Each interview took 30 to 60 minutes. The necessary permission to record the voices of participants was obtained. In all cases, privacy was ensured by conducting the interviews in a private room where no other person was present except the interviewee and the researchers.

Three methods were used to check the validity and credibility of the data. First triangulation (interviews, observations, document study) was used to guarantee the date diversity of data. Two Chinese experts on private Chinese schools in Thailand were invited to exam the data. Participant-confirming was lastly used to check the validity of the data.

### *Data Analysis*

The thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to identify, analyze and report themes within the collected data, which included six phases. First, the gathered data were transcribed to search for meanings and patterns. Second, initial codes were generated from the data to identify semantic and latent features of the data. Third, a search for themes related to the theme of the study was carried out to devise a set of candidate themes. Forth, the themes were reviewed and refined to confirm

the themes and have a good understanding of the different themes. Fifth, themes were defined and named by identifying the essence of each theme and determining aspects each theme represented. Finally, we wrote the report to provide a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive, and interesting explanation of the phenomenon revealed by the data.

### **Results**

Three results are organized around two research objectives: Result 1 and 2 were related to Objective 1 and presented the contextual leadership challenges facing school principals in private Chinese schools. Result 3 was related to Objective 2 and discussed the school principals' perceptions towards their leadership roles and practices.

#### *Omnibus Contextual Leadership Challenges for School Principals*

Chinese culture and identity preservation: As mentioned above, one of the original purposes to establish private Chinese schools was to help these refugees inherit Chinese culture, traditions and Chinese bloodline. However, the responses of the participating school principals unanimously expressed that it was very challenging to do so. The school principal of school E summarized two reasons for this issue:

*"I think that the students are third, even fourth generation of the Isolated Army. The children do not really regard themselves as original Chinese. Chinese culture and tradition seemed to be very far from them. Second, the communities that children live in are full of Thai atmosphere. People everywhere speak Thai with each other. All the social media, news etc., are mostly in Thai. For those who belong to ethnic groups, it is even harder for them to accept Chinese culture and tradition."* (School E)

School legalization: This problem is related to the history dating back to 1950s. The schools were built by the Chinese refugees, and Thai educational authorities did not officially accept and approve these schools to be formal Thai private schools. Although these schools have existed for more than 70 years, the majority of them and their management remain officially unapproved. The participating school principal of School B expressed his opinions on this issue. He explained, "The legalization of schools is due to historical reasons, and it is really hard to legalize the schools."

Financial constrains: Most the participating school principals reported that their schools faced severe financial challenge, as school operations depended

mainly on low tuition fees and unstable social donations obtained from various channels.

School principal from school A analyzed the reasons. First, parents in remote areas were farmers without stable income, and some of them could not afford to pay the tuition. Second, the school principals also had very limited channels to raise funds, and the number of students was significantly less than that in urban area schools. Third, due to the small school size and geographic location, it was hard for these schools to attract external attention.

Political crisis: Taiwan has great influence over these schools because they were established by descendants of Kuomintang. The Taiwanese government greatly reduced its support for these schools after the election in 2000. In the early 2000s, the Consulate of the People's Republic of China in Chiangmai began to step in and offer various aid to some schools in Chiangmai Province to win popular support from Thai-Yunnanese. The school principal of School G spoke about the political pressure from Taiwan, indicating that he had been under great pressure and had been warned not to be too close to mainland China, otherwise, all the support from Taiwan would be cut off, and to make it worse, he might be removed as the school principal. He said he was caught in a political dilemma and crisis.

#### *Discrete Contextual Challenges for School Principals*

Academic problems: According to participating school principal A, there was no unified curriculum for the Chinese language teaching. There existed randomness in teaching and management. There were no supervisors to oversee teaching and learning. Teachers did not write teaching plans and decided on the teaching content by themselves. Therefore, the teaching quality was not good. As for students, school principal from Schools B complained that although students regarded the Chinese language as an important tool for their future study or career, many students did not have a strong interest to study it. Some of them took a “take-it-easy” attitude toward the Chinese language study and did not take it seriously.

Teacher recruitment: Most of the interviewed school principals indicated that there were insufficient well-trained teachers with a good command of the Chinese language and professional teaching skills, and it was very challenging for them to recruit enough teachers to work in their schools.

The school principal of School D, for instance, reported “Nowadays, not many people want to work in our school because the salary is not high. Young people are more interested in working in Bangkok and other

larger cities.” The school principal of School C noted that “As the number of students continues to increase, teacher shortage becomes a more serious problem, and I have to ask senior students who have no experience in teaching in Thai public schools to teach the primary and junior students Chinese in my school”.

Problems with local communities: Some of participating school principals said their schools received little support from local communities. The school principal from school F expressed his disappointment in the gratefulness on the part of some parents. He complained that some parents merely regard the schools as some kind of kindergarten to care for their children as they worked outside. Principal from School H also complained that some parents, especially parents from ethnic groups, did not really care about what their children could learn at school. He added that not all the community members were supportive as some community members believed that the school principal used the school to get personal economic and political benefits.

#### *School Principals' Perceptions of their Roles and Leadership Practices*

Being proud of their leadership roles and practices: Despite the challenging nature of leading private Chinese schools in Thailand, it was evident that all the interviewed school principals felt very proud of their roles in such challenging schools.

*“We need money (to survive). Life here is not easy because this area is a remote area, and has many ethnic groups. No matter how hard it is, I will try my best to spread the Chinese language and culture. Children's parents thank me for creating opportunities for their children to learn Chinese. I feel happy and proud when I see my students, especially those from ethnic groups, can communicate in Chinese.”* (School I)

Playing manifold leadership roles: The participating principals also emphasized the manifold roles they played. One principal said he needed to deal with internal school affairs such as teaching and learning affairs, school logistical affairs, etc. He also needed to work as a fundraiser to socialize with various external social organizations to keep the school alive.

*“I get up at 5am and go to my school to ensure the school is running smoothly. After that, I go out to meet different people. The main purpose (of doing so) is to get some funding for my school because we have quite limited funding. I also try to help some other small private Chinese schools with severe financial problems. You see, I am so busy every day.”* (School E)



Emphasizing the role of being moral leaders: The participating school principals believed that their roles were more than improving Chinese education. This perspective was embedded in the deeply-rooted Confucian belief that apart from improving students' academic success, educators need to guide learners towards the core ethical values of Confucius, which are benevolence and propriety. The participating school principals especially emphasized their role as moral leaders, striving to embed Confucian values in their students.

*"We need to equip our students with both academic knowledge and good moral character so that they can stand up to society in relation to their intellect and conscience and good moral character. They will be fearless of any problems as well."* (School I)

Advancing with the changing times and contexts: School principals also stressed that the current context is very different from that in the old days. They not only need to promote Chinese education and pass on Chinese culture to students, but also need to prepare their children to live in a cross-cultural environment and help them integrate within Thai society, and attend to their citizen responsibility as Thai nationals.

*"We should not forget our roots and culture. Our ancestors came from China, but we have already settled down in northern Thailand, and (many) have Thai identity. We have become Thai-Chinese, and it is essential for (our) children to integrate themselves with the local Thai communities and live with each other harmoniously."* (School H)

## Discussion

The findings revealed a number of contextual leadership challenges among private Chinese schools in northern Thailand. Some of them were omnibus contextual challenges such as Chinese culture and identity preservation, school legalization, financial constraints, and political crisis. Some were discrete contextual challenges such as improving teaching and learning, teacher recruitment, problems with local communities. Both types of contextual challenges nested and interacted with each other and had great influence on local leadership practices. School principals of these schools needed to make necessary changes and efforts to adapt to the fast-changing context to make their leadership practices successful and effective. This finding adds to the contextual leadership theory by Johns (2006). It also supports the conclusion of Day and Sammons (2013), Przybylski, Chen, and Hu (2018) who argued that when leading schools, school principals should make necessary

changes according to the contextual factors to make their leadership effective and successful.

Although facing multiple levels of responsibilities and contextual challenges, the participating leaders felt proud of their role as school principals. Apart from improving Chinese education, they played manifold leadership roles such as culture and identity preservation, helping students integrate into new society and community and cultivating students with good morality. These findings support the existing evidence on the challenging nature of leadership in schools with special context, like faith schools that need to both improve school and student performance and preserve their own special values and cultures, and learning good morality (Hammad & Shah, 2019; Neidhart & Lamb, 2016; Prior, 2018).

## Conclusion and Recommendation

This qualitative study explored the contextual challenges facing school principals in private Chinese schools in northern Thailand, and their perceptions towards their leadership practices and roles. Although the sample size was small, the data unveiled the unique contextual challenges experienced by the participating school principals, which can enhance the knowledge and understanding about private Chinese schools. It is certain that the specific challenges unveiled by this small-scale research should draw more attention to educational policy makers and leaders of various social organizations, both in Thailand and foreign countries, and encourage them to seek more methods to help and support private Chinese schools to solve today's and tomorrow's challenges.

This study took place in Chinese schools in Thai-Yunnanese villages in northern Thailand and the result might not be relevant to Chinese schools in other regions. Therefore, future research could be conducted in private Chinese schools in other areas of Thailand to compare the similarities and differences in contextual leadership challenges. This study also only involved school principals, and the results may not cover the conceptions of other stakeholders. Therefore, future research can be conducted to explore and analyze the perceptions of both school principals and other stakeholders so that different perceptions on local contextual challenges in private Chinese schools can be compared and better understood.

## Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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