

# **A Model for the Assimilation of Organisational Culture for the Communication of Sino-Thai Culture of Confucius Institutes in Bangkok and the Surrounding Area**

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## Abstract

The Kingdom of Thailand and the People's Republic of China have had a cultural relationship for a long time. The Confucius Institute is an international organization aiming to teach the Chinese language in Thai secondary schools. The organisational culture within this organization can bring success and efficiency. Therefore, this research focuses on the history, problems and study of different solutions to the current organisational culture of the Confucius Institute and Sino-Thai relationships in Bangkok and its surrounding provinces. This study is conducted through cultural qualitative research. The study methods include interviews, focus group discussions and meetings with 95 individuals. The data was analyzed by typological analysis, analytic induction, triangulation and descriptive analysis. The research shows that the Confucius Institute was founded on November 21, 2008 through collaboration between the Confucius Institute Headquarters, The International Office for Promotion of Teaching and Learning of the Chinese Language (HANBAN), the Thai Ministry of Education and the management team of each secondary school. Each Confucius Institute within the schools has its own unique history. They were founded within secondary schools for a special purpose. They serve as one of many departments under the school's management team. Their mission is to teach the Chinese language to both students in that school and other people in the community, employing Chinese teachers and study material support from HANBAN. The management team is composed of people from both Thailand and China. The organizational culture has been assimilated through mutual work in the community where the school is located. The success of the assimilation relies upon the application of the local organizational culture, kinship culture, success-oriented culture and a tight-knitted community spirit. Currently, Confucius Institutes are located in various secondary, public and private schools. They are managed internally. The mission is to teach the Chinese language to the students and prepare Chinese-language curricula to suit student needs. Moreover, the institutes are responsible for cultural exchange activities in different forms under the supervision of the Sino-Thai management team, as well as the school director. The activities are supposed to be based on the HANBAN curriculum. However, there are problems with the organizational culture and cultural communication, especially unclear organizational culture policy, lack of unity, structural inefficiency and poor system management. The internal environment is not suitable for work. The success of Chinese classrooms within the school system and outside the school system is not concrete. Also, there are not enough Chinese teachers and they are not able to communicate effectively to students. Not all of the teachers are able to represent

the Chinese culture well. Some find it difficult to take part in the activities, or even get used to the new environment in Thailand. The Sino-Thai culture exchange is still not applicable in the curriculum. Other problems include a lack of teaching materials and funding, discontentment among Chinese teachers with their teaching experience in Thailand, and lack of pride in Sino-Thai cultural exchange. The assimilation model of organizational culture in Confucius Institutes for the Sino-Thai communication presented in this paper is a semantic model.

**Keywords:** assimilation, organizational culture, Sino-Thai culture,  
Confucius Institute

## Introduction

Due to their close geographic proximity, Thailand (formerly Siam) and China have had a close relationship for thousands of years. There is evidence of Chinese interactions with Thai culture as far back as the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty of China (141-87BC). The strength of the Sino-Thai relationship was built up during the Sukhothai period of Thai history (1238-1438), when traders from China began to settle on the Thai mainland. This immigration continued and reached a peak during the World War years and as a consequence of the Chinese Civil War (1927-1950). The majority of immigrants at this time were from Southern Chinese provinces. Due to this history of immigration and shared culture, there is a saying in Thailand that "*Thai jeen chai eun glai pee nong gan*" [Thai and Chinese people are the same as family]. Thailand has assimilated a number of cultural, administrative and financial practices from Chinese immigrants, and Chinese influence is especially visible in Thai cuisine. It may even be possible to argue that Chinese people and their culture have been integrated into Thai society more than any other people or civilization. The close ties between Thai and Chinese civilians have helped foster a strong governmental relationship between the two countries (Jantawanit, 1999: 1-2).

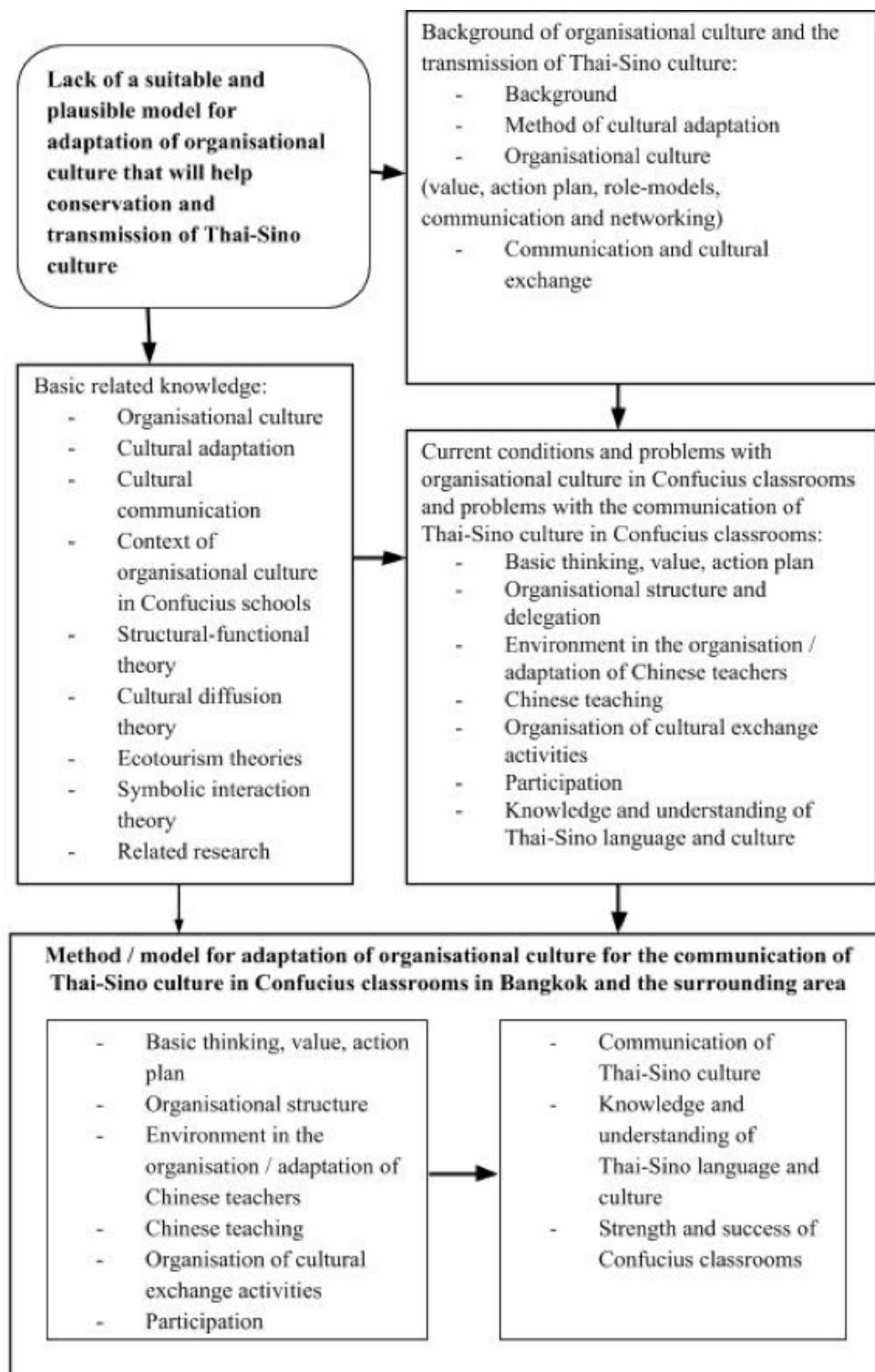
One of the leading figures in the modern association between the two countries is Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. Her royal highness has visited China over twenty times and has been to each of the Chinese provinces to strengthen the relationship between the Thai and Chinese people. More than simply a goodwill ambassador, Princess Sirindhorn is recognized by the Chinese people as being a positive influence on Chinese international relationships. Her majesty is a Chinese speaker and is schooled in Chinese culture, citing her mother, Queen Sirikit, as the influence on her interest in the country because she was encouraged to learn an Eastern language to compliment her knowledge of Western languages. Rather than merely taking an interest in the spoken language, Princess Sirindhorn also developed a passion for Chinese poetry and novels, especially those from the Tang and Song Dynasties. Her majesty translated over 100 Chinese poems in Thai, as well as the famous novel "The Butterfly" by renowned Chinese author Wang Meng, among others. The princess made Chinese literature, and by extension Chinese lifestyle and customs, accessible to a Thai audience, further cementing the Sino-Thai relationship. Due to her majesty's involvement and promotion of Chinese culture, in the year 2000, the Chinese Ministry of Education bestowed upon her an official award for "friendship to the Chinese language and culture". A further recognition was awarded by the literature council in 2001 and in 2004 Princess Sirindhorn was made a goodwill ambassador to China (Chambers, 2005).

Chinese is the world's most spoken native language and it is also one of the six official languages of the United Nations. Not only is Mandarin Chinese spoken by over one billion people within China, it is also spoken in the many Chinese enclaves dotted around the globe, including communities in Thailand. Additionally, due to the settling of Chinese immigrants and cross-cultural marriage, there are many Chinese loanwords in the Thai language, especially words describing food, plants, fruit and culture. Some examples are the Thai words for chair (*gao-ee*), table (*toh*), tofu (*tao-hoo*) and garlic chives (*guy-chai*).

Within Thailand, the Chinese government have given authority to the Confucius Institute Headquarters and The International Office for Promotion of Teaching and Learning of the Chinese Language (HANBAN) to manage the teaching of the Chinese language under the guidance of the Chinese Ministry of Education. This is part of a policy to cooperate more closely with ASEAN nations (Wen, 2016). One of the policies of the ministry is to establish Confucius Institutes within Thai higher education institutions and Confucian classes in Thai primary and secondary schools to promote the Chinese language and culture. From 2006 to the present day, twelve Confucius Institutes and 11 Confucian classes have been established. International partnerships have also been established, such as that between the University of Khon Kaen and Southwest University in Chongqing, China. On the 30th and 31st August, 2016, the Confucius Institute Headquarters and HANBAN worked with the Confucius Institute of Khon Kaen University to organize a summit for directors of Confucius Institutes across Thailand. The summit concluded five objectives for Confucian programs in Thailand, which were (a) cooperation between Confucius Institutes and Chinese enterprises for the benefit of Thai society and communities, (b) elevation of the level of teaching and learning Chinese language by Confucius Institutes in Thailand, (c) foundation of an alumni association of the Confucius Institutions, (d) expansion of Chinese language assessment (*Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì* – HSK – a Chinese language proficiency test), and (e) cooperation between the Confucius Institute and other organizations in the local community to train Chinese-speaking Thai teachers.

These institutions play a potentially vital role in the promotion of Chinese language and culture within Thailand, yet there has not yet been any study to develop a model for the assimilation of organizational culture for the communication of Sino-Thai culture in the Confucius Institutes of Bangkok and the surrounding area. For this reason, the current research project was designed with three objectives to (a) study the history of organizational culture and communication of Sino-Thai culture in the Confucius Institutes of Bangkok and the surrounding area, (b) to study the current state and problems with organizational culture and communication of

**Figure 1. Research framework**



Sino-Thai culture in the Confucius Institutes of Bangkok and the surrounding area, and (c) to develop a model for the assimilation of organizational culture for the communication of Sino-Thai culture in the Confucius Institutes of Bangkok and the surrounding area (Figure 1).

## **Research Aims**

There were three primary aims to this investigation: (a) to study the background of organizational culture and Sino-Thai cultural communication in Confucius Institutes in Bangkok and the surrounding area; (b) to study the problems and current state of organizational culture and Sino-Thai cultural communication in Confucius Institutes in Bangkok and the surrounding area; and (c) to study a model for the assimilation of organizational culture for Sino-Thai cultural communication in Confucius Institutes in Bangkok and the surrounding area.

## **Literature Review**

There has been a recent expansion of Chinese cultural presence in and around the Mekong river delta. The establishment of Confucius Institutes in countries neighboring China has been met with a mixed reception, although Thailand and Cambodia are two examples of Southeast Asian nations welcoming stronger ties with Beijing. Actually, the drive for an expanded network of international Confucius Institutes has been viewed by some as a conscious ‘effort on the part of China to enhance the strength of its cultural power in relation to its neighbors’ (Van Chinh, 2014, p. 85). Indeed, the systematic spread of Chinese language and culture has been skeptically viewed by some as an attempt to ‘increase China’s “soft power” and help it project an image of itself as a benign country’ (Gil, 2017; Paradise, 2009, p. 647). By contrast, scholars within China argue that the globalization of a language is a consequence of a country’s hard power, citing English, French, Spanish, Russian and Arabic as classic examples of languages that have benefitted from the wealth and political reach of their parent nation. China is merely the latest global power to realise this side-effect of real strength (Yinghui, 2011). Although very little of the literature criticising Confucius Institutes as propaganda tools is based on any real evidence (Sharp, 2010), there was renewed criticism of the program among scholars examining the Braga Incident, an academic scandal in Portugal in 2014. On 22nd July 2014, Xu Lin, the Director-General of the HANBAN and the Chief Executive of the Confucius Institute, ordered staff at the European Association of Chinese Stud-

ies Conference in Braga to remove mention of Taiwanese language institutes from the conference program (Switzer, 2018). This created a diplomatic incident and, to some, was further proof that the Confucius Institutes are vehicles for advancing the political agenda of the Chinese government (Durrer, O'Brien and Miller, 2017).

The positive impact of the Confucius Institutes for China has been to increase the level of spoken Mandarin worldwide and give China a greater influence in the world's market of education. While studies indicate the unlikelihood of Mandarin Chinese replacing English as the most widely used language, there is certainly a growing consensus that the Chinese language will be an important factor in the future unity of the world (Zhao and Huang, 2010). The development of China's Confucius program has consequently been rapid but there is need for a closer management of the strengths and weaknesses of individual institutes to promote the quality of language education offered. Two general problems have been identified by commentators: (a) a lack of teacher training and development of teaching methods and materials; and (b) inadequate interaction with local communities and community participation within the target countries (Ying and Wen-Jing, 2009). Nevertheless, recent studies have identified a 'transformational power of intercultural experiences on teacher development' (Ye and Edwards, 2018).

This second point seems significant. A study of Thai employees working for Chinese firms in Bangkok found that there are significant differences in cultural values between Chinese employers and their staff (Bunchapattanasakda & Wong, 2010). There are clear similarities here between businesses and educational establishments (Xia, 2017). However, and in spite of Chinese manager reluctance to adapt to the Thai culture, it should be noted that Thai workers in the case study were satisfied working for their Chinese bosses (Wongsurawat, 2017). Nonetheless, the level of community participation and cultural assimilation on the part of the Chinese teachers in Confucius Institutes in Bangkok is an area that the following paper will explore further.

## Research Methodology

This is a cultural qualitative investigation employing both documentary analysis and field research. The duration of this investigation was two years, from August 2014 to July 2016. The research area was purposively selected within Bangkok and the surrounding provinces and five specific Confucius Institutes were chosen (Bangkok, unless otherwise stated): (a) Chitralada School, (b) Traimit Wittayalai School, (c) Suan Gulap Wittayalai School, (d) Assumption Panitiyakorn School and

(e) Nawamin Sachinutit Howang School (Nonthaburi Province). These locations were selected according to three criteria: (a) they were Confucius Institutes located within Bangkok, (b) they had a unique identifying feature, and (c) they had been established for many years. The research respondents for this investigation were also purposively selected and divided into three groups, key informants, casual informants and general informants. The key informant group of 15 individuals included one Thai manager of the Confucian program in each of the five schools, one Chinese manager of the Confucian program in each of the five schools and one director or assistant director from each of the five schools. The casual informant group of 40 individuals was composed of 15 Chinese language and culture teachers, 10 Thai nationals teaching Chinese language and culture and 15 individuals responsible for the administration of the Confucian programs. The general informant group was composed of 40 students, parents and exchange students involved with the Confucian programs.

Data was collected from document analysis and field notes. In the field, data was gathered from structured and unstructured interviews with research respondents, participant and non-participant observation, focus-group discussions and a summary workshop. All data collected was verified using a triangulation method, before being classified in groups according to the research aims. Data was then analyzed by typological analysis and analytic induction and is presented here as a descriptive analysis.

## Results

### **The Background of Organizational Culture and Sino-Thai Cultural Communication in Confucius Institutes in Bangkok and the Surrounding Area**

Thailand and China are close international neighbors and share many common features, especially in language and culture. On the 21st November 2008, The Thai Ministry of Education and The International Office for Promotion of Teaching and Learning of the Chinese Language (HANBAN), along with the management teams of eleven Thai secondary schools signed up to participate in a program to promote Confucius Institutes in Thailand. The five Confucius Institutes examined as part of this investigation have differing backgrounds. The Confucius Institute of Chitralada School was established as part of the Chitralada Royal Villa in Bangkok. The Confucius Institute at Traimit Wittayalai School is part of a Thai temple and is the oldest of its kind in the world. The Confucius Institute at Suan Gulap Wittayalai School is part of an all-boys establishment of considerable repute in Thailand. The

Confucius Institute at Assumption Panitiyakorn School is notable for being part of a private education establishment focused on the promotion of Christian values. Finally, the Confucius Institute at Nawamin Sachinutit Howang School is the only one of the five to be located outside Bangkok (in Nonthaburi Province). Despite these differing backgrounds and statuses, the Confucius Institutes use very similar methods for the adaptation of organizational culture and the communication of Sino-Thai culture.

Firstly, the Confucian centers are set up as subject groups within the schools with specific objectives and are treated as government departments under the jurisdiction of the school administrator. They are responsible for the teaching of Chinese language to students inside and outside the school system using teachers and resources financed by a combined budget from HANBAN and the school. The head of the department is a cooperative position filled by one Thai national and one Chinese national. Teachers are both Thai nationals and Chinese nationals.

Secondly, the organizational culture is adapted through combined work practices, in terms of language, values, personal and work planning, model behaviors and cultural networking. These are a combination of Thai government culture, local school culture and the individual cultures of the Thai and Chinese teachers with the aim of success according to the clearly defined objectives of the government and HANBAN. The culture is exchanged in the interactions between staff members. The success of the Confucius Institutes depends on the cooperation of department members and the integration of government, family and individual cultures.

### **The Problems and Current State of Organizational Culture and Sino-Thai Cultural Communication in Confucius Institutes in Bangkok and the Surrounding Area**

Presently, Confucius Institutes in Bangkok and the surrounding area are located in both private and government secondary schools and are managed internally. The main responsibility of the institutions is to teach Chinese language to students within the school as a second language as part of the Foreign Language Department. The institutes follow a variety of curricula according to the needs of the students and Sino-Thai culture is exchanged through a range of activities. Academic study of the Chinese language is achieved through standard lessons, as well as extra-curricular activities. The institutes are managed by Thai and Chinese nationals, who work in a cooperative head of department position, under the jurisdiction of the school director and according to the standards set out by HANBAN. There are

designated rooms for practical language learning, activities and a library. Permanent exhibitions are housed in the activities room and Chinese language books donated by HANBAN are kept in the library, as well as a system for receiving Chinese satellite television and accessing current information and world news.

The problems with organizational culture and the communication of Sino-Thai culture revolve around a lack of clarity and adaptation. There is little unity and efficiency in the delegation of duties and assignments and the teaching and learning of Chinese language inside and outside the formal system is not yet exemplary. The Chinese teachers have problems with their use of the Thai language and the Thai teachers struggle with their use of the Chinese language and skills in implementing specific cultural exchange activities. There are significant limitations with personal adaptation to new cultural ideas. Regarding the communication of Sino-Thai culture, there are problems with the management of activities, understanding of the language, use of communication devices, budget and access to desired target groups. Many of the problems stem from a lack of deep understanding and knowledge of the teachers in the opposite language and cultural activities.

### **A Model for the Assimilation of Organizational Culture for Sino-Thai Cultural Communication in Confucius Institutes in Bangkok and the Surrounding Area**

In order for the adaptation of organizational culture for Sino-Thai cultural communication in Confucius Institutes in Bangkok and the surrounding area to be successful, the institutes should clearly define their own points of cultural organization, structural management and effective work systems. Results from interviews in the field and focus group discussions suggest that the number of procedural steps should be reduced and tasks should be delegated suitably. This will create an atmosphere of professionalism, good governance and generosity and will be a reflection of exemplary teaching and learning. Cultural exchange activities should be varied and have clear objectives, while teaching staff should undertake professional development activities to increase their familiarity in Sino-Thai culture. There must also be tighter budget planning and more effective management and use of resources.

As a consequence of these suggestions, the researchers developed a model for the assimilation of organizational culture for Sino-Thai cultural communication in Confucius Institutes in Bangkok and the surrounding area, which is a semantic model. The model was presented to research respondents and concluded as follows:

**Objectives.** Confucius Institutes have a clearly-defined and specific organizational culture. They have an exemplary procedure for the assimilation of organizational culture for Sino-Thai cultural communication, which is suitable for the conditions and context of the local school in which they are located. Members of the institution have a good relationship, participate in organizational activities and proudly share in cultural exchange. All staff have a deep understanding and knowledge of Chinese and Thai culture.

**Method.** There are six methods for the achievement of the objectives for the assimilation of organizational culture for Sino-Thai cultural communication: (a) creative norms, (b) efficient structure, (c) cultural-based style, (d) communicative language-learning, (e) proud cultural assimilation activities, and (f) building of participation and good living.

**Success criteria.** The institute must use an annual development plan and procedural plan. Working policy should be based upon a handbook for the Confucius Institute, a handbook for teaching and learning, a handbook for organization of activities and cultural exchange and a handbook for Chinese language teachers. The institute must be continuously supported by the school and HANBAN. There must be real participation from all members and networks to continuously strengthen organizational culture and develop communication of Sino-Thai culture.

## Discussion

The assimilation of organizational culture for the communication of Sino-Thai culture in Confucius Institutes must be achieved in accordance with the structure of society and should not pervert the existing functions, systems and goals in order to achieve short-term success. It is thus important that Confucius Institutes enjoy a certain level of autonomy from the Chinese government. While HANBAN does play an integral role, the institutes are allowed, and expected, to interact with local people (Hartig, 2012). The assimilation model of organizational culture in Confucius Institutes for the Sino-Thai communication presented in this paper is a semantic model. Past studies show that there are three criteria used to measure its success. The first criterion is that Confucius Institutes have a clear organizational culture. The communication process of Sino-Thai cultural assimilation is concrete. The second criterion is that the human resources are well-compensated and loyal to the organization. The third criterion is that the participants are proud to exchange their knowledge and culture and understand both cultures correctly. Theories of cultural ecology argue that the surrounding environment is an influential deter-

miner of human behavior. Consequently, the surrounding environment is a major factor in the changing nature of culture. While studies have found unwillingness on the part of Chinese managers to adapt to Thai culture (Bunchapattanasakda and Wong, 2010), the deep-rooted Chinese influence on Thai culture may explain the apparent satisfaction of Thai workers employed by Chinese managers. The familiarity of these workers with many Chinese customs and the regular interaction they have with ethnic Chinese in everyday society renders a lack of cultural adaptation on the part of the employers insignificant. These findings are consistent with other recent examinations of the impact of Confucius Institutes on Thai society (Song, 2017). There are six ways for Sino-Thai communication to assimilate well at the Confucius Institutes. They must choose the right values, execution methods, leaders, and network. They should also be located in structural buildings with efficient systems that create the right atmosphere for work on the cultural basis. Moreover, they must arrange Chinese communication classes, hold cultural exchange activities proudly, and encourage participation and community building for their personnel. Success depends on the execution methods, support, collaboration between the personnel and network, the strength of the organizational culture, and development in Sino-Thai communication exchange. These methods are practical and plausible to be used for implementing successful assimilation of organizational culture at Confucius Institutes for Sino-Thai cultural exchange.

## **Conclusion**

From the results of this investigation, the researchers wish to make a number of suggestions for practical application of the findings. Individual Chinese language teachers should use the results to inform their own personal practice. In particular, teachers should develop their own knowledge to better instruct their students. They should also gain a deeper understanding of the opposite culture and incorporate elements into their own lifestyle so that they can be considered role-models of cultural assimilation by their students. Schools and language centers should clearly define their organizational culture so that teachers, students and outside visitors can clearly understand etiquette and procedures. The concepts of relationship and generosity should be a foundation of all policies, as these are promoted by the Thai government. Activities and systems for cultural exchange should also be developed. In addition, there must be continuous and systematic evaluation of cultural assimilation within the institution. The Thai Ministry of Education and HANBAN can use these results to guide future policies.

The researchers would like to suggest a number of areas for potential future research:

1. An in-depth study examining the optimum procedural methods for implementing changes identified in this paper.
2. Investigation into the procedural factors of Confucius Institutes in Bangkok, including working policy should be based upon a handbook for the Confucius Institute, a handbook for teaching and learning, a handbook for organization of activities and cultural exchange and a handbook for Chinese language teachers.
3. Development of a policy for increasing participation in Chinese language teaching and Sino-Thai cultural exchange for both urban and rural schools.
4. Study of the assimilation of organizational culture for the communication of Chinese and native culture of Confucius Institutes in other countries around the world.

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