

Exploring Lived Experiences of Expatriate Teachers: A Phenomenological Study of Chinese Language Teachers at a Private School in Thailand

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Abstract

The growing global demand for Chinese language education has positioned Thailand as a pivotal hub in Southeast Asia due to its robust educational exchanges with China. However, Chinese language teachers (CLTs) in Thai private schools face significant challenges adapting to this unique cultural and institutional environment. This study explores the lived experiences of five CLTs in Thailand, focusing on their navigation of cultural, linguistic, and structural barriers within high power–distance and collectivist settings. Using a phenomenological qualitative methodology supported by Byram’s Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model and Hofstede’s Cultural Dimension Theory (CDT), the research employs semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to uncover key insights. Findings highlight CLTs’ challenges, including restricted pedagogical autonomy, cultural adaptation struggles, and work–life balance issues. Yet, the study also reveals how marginalization paradoxically fosters pedagogical innovation and autonomy, enabling teachers to adapt their teaching practices creatively. These insights underscore the urgent need for Thai educational institutions to develop supportive policies that enhance intercultural communication, professional integration, and the well-being of foreign educators. This study contributes to Thai education by addressing the gaps in understanding the adaptation of CLTs in non-Western contexts, offering actionable insights for administrators and policymakers to foster an inclusive and effective teaching environment. By advancing theoretical frameworks and practical solutions, the research highlights its relevance in enhancing Thailand’s role as a leader in multicultural education and its efforts to integrate international teachers effectively.

Keywords: Chinese language education in Thailand; Chinese expatriate teacher; Thai school; Cross-cultural adaption; Phenomenological study

Introduction

The global demand for Chinese language education has surged in recent years, driven by the expanding economic and cultural influence of China. (Wang, 2020). Initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative have strengthened educational exchanges between China and Southeast Asia, with Thailand emerging as a significant recipient of Chinese cultural investment. In Thailand alone, the number of students learning Chinese has grown by over 40% in the last decade, with 60% of private schools now including Chinese language programs in their curricula. (Cao & Tananuraksakul, 2023). This rapid expansion has led to an influx of Chinese language teachers (CLTs) to meet demand, yet their adaptation to foreign educational systems remains complex and challenging.

Despite the increased presence of CLTs in Southeast Asia, research into their lived experiences and adaptation challenges in non-Western environments remains limited. Previous studies on international educators primarily focus on their experiences in Western contexts, where the cultural and institutional dynamics differ significantly from those in Southeast Asia. (Yang et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2009). In Thailand, CLTs encounter unique structural and cultural barriers, such as rigid hierarchical norms and high-context communication, which often restrict their pedagogical autonomy and complicate their integration into the educational environment. (Ewe & Min, 2021) Furthermore, language barriers add another layer of complexity; fewer than 20% of CLTs report sufficient Thai language proficiency, often hindering their ability to fully participate in school-related communication and decision-making processes.

In addition to the professional challenges, the cultural adaptation process for CLTs in Thailand involves navigating unfamiliar cultural expectations and building relationships within a tightly-knit institutional setting. Studies have shown that Chinese teachers frequently experience isolation and marginalization in Thai schools due to cultural misunderstandings and differing pedagogical practices. (Duangmanee & Waluyo, 2023) However, few studies examine how these factors affect CLTs' professional identities and strategies for coping with such challenges. Addressing this gap is essential, as understanding CLTs' adaptation experiences can guide policy improvements to support their integration into local educational systems effectively.

This study aims to address this research gap by exploring the lived experiences of CLTs in Thai private schools. By analyzing how these teachers navigate and respond to cultural, linguistic, and institutional challenges, this research deepens our understanding of their adaptation processes. It highlights the potential for policy interventions to support international teachers more effectively. Given Thailand's strategic role in promoting Chinese language education in Southeast Asia, the findings offer valuable insights for enhancing teacher integration and fostering a more inclusive educational environment, strengthening Thailand's capacity to lead multicultural and cross-cultural educational initiatives.

Objectives

1. Uncover the essence of Chinese teachers' lived experiences in Thai private schools.
2. Identify key opportunities and challenges these teachers face.
3. Investigate the strategies Chinese teachers use to cope with cultural differences.

Literature Review

Challenges faced by expatriate teachers

The rapid increase in global mobility has highlighted the complexities expatriate teachers face in adapting to new cultural and educational environments. Studies emphasize challenges, including language barriers, cultural adaptation, and professional identity reconstruction. (Sherman, 2023; Yang et al., 2018). However, existing research predominantly centers on the adaptation experiences of foreign teachers in Western contexts, where low power distance and individualistic cultures prevail. Such studies overlook the unique environment of Thailand, a country characterized by high power distance, collectivist norms, and hierarchical institutional structures. (Hamdan Alghamdi, 2014). This knowledge gap is significant, as CLTs in Thailand encounter challenges navigating strict social hierarchies and differing cultural expectations within the educational system, which differ fundamentally from Western teaching environments.

Specific Challenges of Teaching Chinese to Thai Students

Teaching Chinese to Thai students presents various challenges deeply rooted in linguistic, educational, and cultural differences. Recent empirical studies, as presented in Table 1 below, highlight the complexities faced by Chinese immigrant teachers in Thailand.

Table 1 Comparative analysis of challenges of teaching Chinese to Thai students

Source	Research findings	Problem
Yan and He (2020)	The tonal aspects of Chinese pose significant challenges for Thai learners, who must differentiate between tones that alter word meanings—a less critical concept in Thai.	Difficulty for Thai students in mastering the tonal nature of Chinese language due to the non-tonal nature of Thai.
Yang et al. (2021)	The complexity of Chinese characters requires memorization of both form and meaning, contrasting sharply with the relatively straightforward Thai script.	The complex character-based Chinese script presents significant learning challenges for students accustomed to alphabetic scripts.
Tong et al. (2024)	Teachers are compelled to innovate and adapt their methodologies, using multimedia resources, interactive language games, and scaffolded learning to overcome linguistic barriers.	There is a need for innovative and adaptive teaching methods to address the linguistic challenges faced by Thai students learning Chinese.
Gong et al. (2021)	Thai students, used to a collaborative and interactive learning environment, struggle to adapt to Chinese educators' traditional, lecture-based style.	The disparity in educational expectations and learning styles between Thai students and Chinese teachers leads to challenges in classroom management and student engagement.
Hu and Dai (2021)	The concept of 'face' is essential in both Chinese and Thai cultures. It influences classroom dynamics and requires careful navigation by teachers to maintain respect and authority while fostering inclusivity.	Cultural differences in the concept of 'face' complicate classroom behavior and teacher–student interactions.

While recent studies have highlighted some of the linguistic and cultural challenges faced by Chinese teachers in Thailand, most research predominantly addresses the adaptation experiences of expatriate teachers within Western contexts (e.g., Yang et al. (2018); Pudelko and Tenzer (2019)). These studies often overlook the unique cultural environment of Thailand, characterized by high power distance and a collectivist orientation, where hierarchical relationships and respect for authority strongly influence professional interactions and pedagogical practices. This gap is particularly relevant as Chinese teachers must navigate distinct cultural expectations around authority, group harmony, and communication styles that differ significantly from those in Western classrooms. Additionally, while the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) model and cultural dimension theory (CDT) have been employed in previous research to analyze teacher adaptation, their applications primarily focus on low power distance and individualistic settings, limiting their relevance in more hierarchical, collectivist environments like Thailand. (Ewe & Min,

2021) This study, therefore, extends the application of ICC and CDT, adapting these frameworks to better capture the complex, cross-cultural adaptation processes that Chinese teachers experience in Thai educational settings. Thus, it fills a critical gap in the literature.

Theoretical framework

This study applies two theoretical frameworks to analyze the lived experiences of Chinese language teachers in Thai private schools: ICC and CDT. ICC model (Byram, 2020) helps in understanding educators' navigation of intercultural interactions, focusing on intercultural attitudes, knowledge, interpretation and relational skills, discovery and interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness. This model examines how Chinese teachers develop intercultural skills in their teaching practices. CDT provides a framework for understanding cross-cultural differences, emphasizing six dimensions of culture (Żemojtel-Piotrowska & Piotrowski, 2023): power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence.

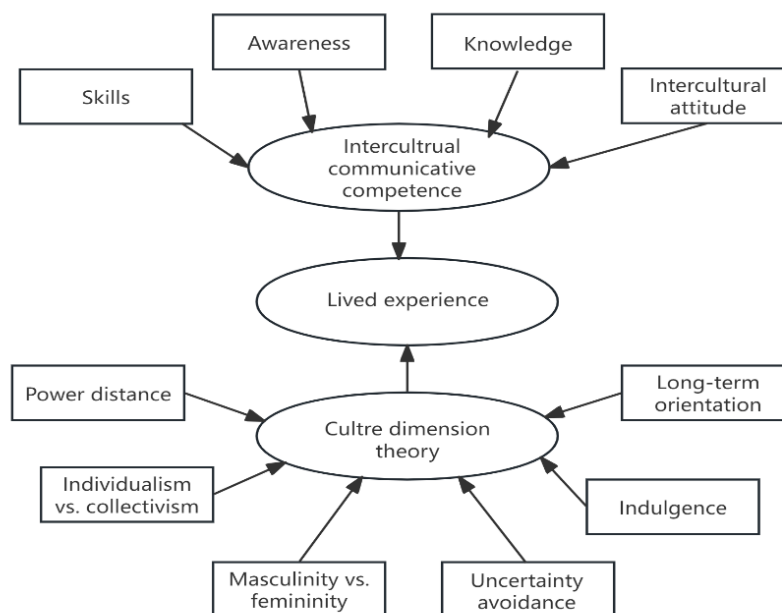


Figure 1. Theoretical framework of the study

Research Methodology

The phenomenological approach is particularly suited for this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the participant's subjective experiences, capturing the nuanced realities of their professional and personal lives. (Creswell, 2021).

Sampling method

The study involved a sample of five Chinese language teachers employed in Thai private schools. Purposive sampling ensured the participants had specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives. The selection criteria included teachers with at least three years of teaching experience in Thailand and currently working in an international or private school setting. Five participants were collected in total. The small sample size is consistent with the phenomenological research approach. The basic information of the participants is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Basic information of participants

Number	Gender	Age	Education	Working experience
1	MaleMale	35	Master in Education	5 years
2	Female	30	Bachelor in Chinese	6 years
3	Male	40	PhD in Linguistics	10 years
4	Female	28	Master in Linguistics	3 years
5	Male	25	Bachelor in Education	2 years

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to elicit detailed descriptions of the teachers' experiences. The interview guide was developed by integrating two theories, focusing on cultural adaptation, pedagogical practices, and professional identity construction. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in Mandarin to ensure participants could express themselves fully.

Data analysis

The data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, adhering to the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2023). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed in multiple stages: Initial coding involved identifying significant statements that reflected the participants' experiences; axial coding was then used to group these statements into broader categories based on similarities and differences; and selective coding was applied to integrate these categories into overarching themes that encapsulate the essence of the teachers' experiences.

This study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were assured confidentiality and anonymity, with all identifying information

removed from the transcripts. The study was also approved by the relevant ethics review board at the research institution.

Research Results

This part details the coding results, which are the foundation for exploring the three key research questions.

The Essence of Lived Experience

This study conducted five themes and 13 corresponding sub-themes, outlined in Table 3.

Theme 1: Professional Identity amidst Collectivism. Teachers balance their personal teaching goals with institutional norms, navigating between collaboration, autonomy, and conformity. Their professional identities evolve within a collective framework, where personal aspirations align or contend with group expectations.

Theme 2: Cultural Confluence in Teaching. This theme highlights the interplay between teachers' individual pedagogies and school-based cultural standards. Teachers adjust classroom management and curriculum adaptation to fit institutional expectations, blending their educational philosophies with the cultural norms of the Thai environment.

Theme 3: Adapting to Cross-Cultural Challenges. Teachers adopt strategies to manage cultural differences, develop effective communication methods, and address diverse student needs. This theme emphasizes teachers' resilience and adaptability as they engage with multicultural classrooms.

Theme 4: Achieving Equilibrium. Teachers strive to balance their work duties with personal well-being, employing strategies to manage stress and create harmony between professional and personal life. Maintaining well-being is essential to their effectiveness and satisfaction.

Theme 5: Adjusting to Institutional Policy. Teachers navigate and adapt to school policies, aligning them with their teaching styles. They find ways to balance personal agency with institutional demands, integrating policies while upholding professional integrity.

Table 3 The results of the coding

Selective Codes	Axial Codes
Balancing Individualism and Collectivism	Integration of Individual and Collective Goals Professional Collaboration and Individual Advancement Pedagogical Autonomy vs. Institutional Conformity
Cultural Influence on Educational Practice	Power Dynamics and Classroom Management Pedagogical Flexibility
Navigation Uncertainty in a Cross-Cultural Setting	Overcoming Cultural Barriers Embracing Educational Diversity Adapting Teaching Practices
Pursuit of Well-being in an Academic Context	Work-Life Integration Cultivating Classroom Harmony
Navigating Policy Constraints	Understanding and Navigating Policy Adaptation and Compliance Integration of Policy and Pedagogy

The Challenges and Opportunities Encountered by Chinese Immigration Teacher

Challenges: Realistic autonomy and construction of professional identity

Chinese teachers in Thai private schools encounter substantial barriers at both personal and institutional levels. Teachers often find that institutional policies constrain their pedagogical autonomy in the classroom, leading to tension between administrative expectations and their preferred teaching methods. For instance, P1 noted that rigid school structures limited their ability to use teacher-led strategies to complete lessons efficiently. Similarly, P2 highlighted a conflict between the school's emphasis on maintaining a "lively" classroom and the need for discipline, especially with more challenging groups. Such restrictions have led to frustration and disillusionment, impacting teachers' confidence and professional identity.

Beyond teaching methods, institutional constraints affect the teachers' sense of value within the school. While the school entrusted them with curriculum responsibilities, these teachers still felt marginalized, often facing overwhelming workloads exceeding 30 lessons per week. Despite requests for additional staffing support, administrative responses were dismissive, with local colleagues occasionally remarking that "Chinese teachers can work 7*24." This inequitable treatment reinforced their feelings of professional isolation and undervaluation, even as they played a central role in the school's curriculum development.

Teachers' voices were also frequently disregarded in professional meetings. P3 recounted that after expressing disagreement in Thai, a leader responded, "Sorry, I do not understand your Thai," leaving P3 feeling excluded. These experiences illustrate a broader pattern of systemic marginalization, where teachers, despite their contributions, felt excluded from meaningful engagement within the institution.

Balancing these demanding professional responsibilities with personal life posed further challenges. Many teachers reported working extensively beyond classroom hours on lesson preparation and grading, which affected their well-being. P3 spoke of overtime demands, while P1 highlighted the round-the-clock effort required to prepare students for standardized language tests, leaving little time for rest. The emotional toll was evident, with P4 experiencing sleeplessness and P2 struggling with insomnia. These findings suggest an urgent need for effective work-life balance strategies to support these teachers' well-being and job sustainability.

Opportunities: Realistic autonomy and construction of professional identity

Chinese teachers in Thai private schools face notable work-life balance issues due to extensive workloads that frequently extend beyond classroom hours. Teachers report significant overtime spent on lesson planning and grading. P3 described regular overtime to meet demands for lesson preparation and essay corrections, while P1 mentioned round-the-clock efforts to prepare students for the HSK exam, leaving minimal personal time. The emotional toll is considerable, with P4 experiencing sleeplessness and P2 struggling with insomnia. These findings underscore the urgent need for schools to adopt effective work-life balance strategies to support teacher well-being and ensure sustainable workloads, ultimately enhancing their effectiveness and retention.

Coping with challenges

Chinese teachers in Thai private schools face significant work-life balance challenges due to extensive workloads that often extend far beyond classroom hours. Many teachers report the need to work overtime, particularly for lesson planning, grading, and exam preparation. For example, P3 emphasizes the additional hours required for lesson planning and meticulous essay corrections, while P1 describes the continuous pressure of preparing students for the HSK (Chinese Language Level Test). This demanding schedule leaves little time for personal rest or recuperation, leading to ongoing exhaustion. The emotional toll on teachers is equally notable, with P4 reporting sleeplessness as a result of prolonged stress and P2 struggling with insomnia. This imbalance

between professional responsibilities and personal well-being underscores the urgent need for institutional work-life balance strategies.

Implementing such strategies is essential for fostering a healthier, more sustainable work environment. Schools could consider measures such as workload distribution, dedicated planning periods, and flexible scheduling options to reduce the strain on teachers. Not only would these initiatives support teachers' mental health and job satisfaction, but they would also likely lead to improved teaching performance and increased retention rates. By prioritizing teacher well-being, educational institutions can create a more effective and supportive learning environment, benefiting both educators and students in the long term.

Discussion

This study provides a nuanced understanding of the unique challenges and adaptation processes experienced by Chinese language teachers (CLTs) in Thai private schools, specifically in navigating the cultural, linguistic, and structural barriers presented by a high power-distance, collectivist environment. In alignment with prior studies on expatriate educators, participants reported significant challenges related to language barriers, cultural adaptation, and sustaining a professional identity within hierarchical institutions (Sherman (2023). However, unlike studies in Western educational contexts, this research reveals how the Thai environment, characterized by rigid institutional hierarchy and collectivist norms, distinctly influences teaching practices and interactions. (Byram, 2020; Hamdan Alghamdi, 2014).

A primary finding centers on the tension between institutional policies and teachers' pedagogical autonomy. Participants expressed frustration with restrictions on implementing teacher-centered or innovative teaching methods due to institutional expectations for a structured and lively classroom environment. This differs from Western contexts, where teachers often experience more flexibility. These findings align with Yang et al. (2021) and Gong et al. (2021), who observed similar clashes between Chinese and Thai educational expectations, highlighting the ongoing challenge of balancing institutional conformity with personal teaching approaches. Unlike low power-distance cultures where teachers may have more freedom, CLTs in Thailand must reconcile institutional norms with their teaching philosophies within a stricter hierarchy (Ewe & Min, 2021).

This study also contributes to the ICC model by showcasing how intercultural competence helps teachers handle cross-cultural challenges. CLTs exhibited critical cultural awareness by adapting their communication and teaching methods to suit Thai students' preferences for a supportive, less authoritarian classroom environment. Hu and Dai (2021) emphasize that the concept of “face” in both Chinese and Thai cultures influences classroom dynamics, requiring teachers to create inclusive yet disciplined learning spaces. By tailoring their approaches to reflect Thai students' needs, CLTs effectively developed culturally responsive teaching strategies, thereby enhancing their intercultural competencies in line with the ICC model (Byram, 2020).

This study also expands CDT by analyzing its relevance in a high power–distance, collectivist context like Thailand. As noted in Hofstede's power distance dimension, Thai schools' hierarchical relationships restrict CLTs' professional agency while emphasizing institutional harmony over individual expression. (Żemojtel-Piotrowska & Piotrowski, 2023). This is exemplified in P3's limited input in professional meetings, illustrating how hierarchical norms shape professional interactions, consistent with findings from Hendawy Al-Mahdy et al. (2024) on the experiences of expatriate teachers in high–power–distance settings. This research thereby enriches CDT by showing how these cultural dimensions influence classroom and professional dynamics among educators and administrators.

Notably, while structural constraints are common in the experiences of expatriate teachers, this study reveals how marginalization unexpectedly grants CLTs increased pedagogical autonomy, enabling them to innovate within institutional boundaries. Supporting findings from Duangmanee and Waluyo (2023), the study shows how marginalization allows CLTs to create a “third space” that blends institutional requirements with personal teaching philosophies. This paradoxical autonomy strengthens their professional identities and facilitates adaptive teaching practices, underscoring the resilience and resourcefulness CLTs bring to their roles within restrictive systems.

New Knowledge from Research

This study offers insights into Chinese language teachers' adaptation in Thai private schools, highlighting their development of intercultural competence amid cultural, linguistic, and institutional challenges. Findings reveal how these teachers construct professional identities, gaining autonomy despite marginalization, fostering innovation, and integrating within their roles through resilience and support networks.

Conclusion

This study examined the experiences of Chinese language teachers in Thai private schools, highlighting challenges in balancing institutional demands with teaching autonomy, adapting to a multicultural environment, and managing language barriers. Despite these obstacles, teachers demonstrated resilience and creatively integrated their pedagogical identities.

Suggestion

The findings of this study highlight key managerial implications for school administrators, policymakers, and teacher training institutions. Fostering flexible policies that allow foreign teachers to adjust pedagogical approaches without compromising school goals is essential for administrators. Open communication channels can help foreign teachers express challenges and adapt effectively. For policymakers, the study emphasizes supportive frameworks for integrating foreign educators, such as professional development in intercultural competence and teaching adaptability. Teacher training institutions can enhance programs by incorporating cultural sensitivity, language acquisition, and adaptability skills, equipping teachers for diverse educational environments.

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