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กรณีศึกษานักศึกษาไทย ณ มหาวิทยาลัยครูปักกิ่ง

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บทคัดย่อ : การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพนี้มุ่งศึกษาประสบการณ์การสื่อสารข้ามวัฒนธรรมของนักศึกษานานาชาติชาวไทยจำนวน 9 คน ซึ่งลงทะเบียนเรียนรายวิชาภาษาจีนแบบออนไลน์ของมหาวิทยาลัย Beijing Normal University ในช่วงการแพร่ระบาดของโรคโควิด-19 โดยใช้มิติทางวัฒนธรรมของ Hofstede จำนวน 4 มิติ ได้แก่ ระยะห่างอำนาจ (Power Distance) การหลีกเลี่ยงความไม่แน่นอน (Uncertainty Avoidance) ปัจเจนิยม-ส่วนรวม (Individualism vs. Collectivism) และความเป็นชาย-ความเป็นหญิง (Masculinity vs. Femininity) เป็นกรอบวิเคราะห์ การเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลดำเนินการด้วยการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกแบบกึ่งโครงสร้าง และวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลด้วยการวิเคราะห์เชิงประเด็น (thematic analysis) ผลการวิจัยพบว่า ความคล้ายคลึงทางวัฒนธรรมระหว่างประเทศไทยและประเทศจีน โดยเฉพาะค่านิยมด้านความเคารพต่อผู้มีอำนาจและการอ้างว้างซึ่งความกลมเกลียวทางสังคม ช่วยลดการเกิดความขัดแย้งในการสื่อสารที่แสดงออกอย่างชัดเจน อย่างไรก็ตาม ค่านิยมดังกล่าวในขณะเดียวกันยังส่งผลให้ผู้เรียนมีแนวโน้มลดทอนความกล้าในการแสดงความเห็นต่างหรือการขอคำชี้แจงอย่างเปิดเผย นอกจากนี้ สภาพแวดล้อมการเรียนออนไลน์ซึ่งมีข้อจำกัดด้านสัญญาณการสื่อสารที่ไม่ใช่ถ้อยคำ (เช่น สีหน้า ท่าทาง และน้ำเสียง) รวมถึงลักษณะการตอบสนองที่ล่าช้า ได้ยิ่งเพิ่มความท้าทายด้านการสื่อสารให้เด่นชัดมากขึ้น งานวิจัยนี้จึงมีส่วนช่วยเสริมความเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างมิติทางวัฒนธรรมกับบริบทการเรียนรู้แบบดิจิทัล และนำเสนอข้อเสนอเชิงปฏิบัติสำหรับผู้สอนภาษาจีนแก่ผู้เรียนต่างชาติ เพื่อพัฒนาห้องเรียนออนไลน์ให้มีความไวต่อความแตกต่างทางวัฒนธรรมและเอื้อต่อการสื่อสารอย่างมีประสิทธิภาพ

คำสำคัญ : การสื่อสารข้ามวัฒนธรรม; การสอนภาษาจีนออนไลน์; นักศึกษานานาชาติ; มิติทางวัฒนธรรมของ Hofstede; มหาวิทยาลัยครูปักกิ่ง

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CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN ONLINE CHINESE LANGUAGE CLASSES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THAI STUDENTS AT BEIJING NORMAL UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: This study examined cross-cultural communication in online Chinese language courses with nine Thai international students at Beijing Normal University during COVID-19. Using Hofstede's four cultural dimensions as an analytical framework, semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that cultural similarities between Thailand and China particularly shared values of respect for authority and social harmony minimized overt communication conflicts but constrained open dialogue and participation. The online learning environment, characterized by reduced non-verbal cues and delayed feedback, amplified these patterns. The study demonstrates that cultural dimensions interact with digital learning contexts and offers practical implications for international Chinese language educators seeking to create culturally responsive online classrooms.

Keywords: Cross-cultural communication; Online Chinese language teaching; International students; Hofstede's cultural dimensions; Beijing Normal University

来华留学生线上汉语教学中的跨文化交际研究 ——以北京师范大学泰国留学生为例

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摘要: 本研究采用质性研究方法,以霍夫斯泰德文化维度理论的四个维度(权力距离、不确定性规避、个人主义与集体主义、男性化与女性化)为分析框架,对新冠疫情期间在北京师范大学参加线上汉语课程的 9 名泰国留学生进行了深度访谈,探讨其跨文化交际体验。研究发现,中泰两国文化的相似性,尤其是对权威的尊重和社会和谐的共同价值观,有效减少了显性的交际冲突。然而,这些文化特征也制约了学生公开表达异议或寻求澄清的意愿。线上学习环境因非语言线索减少和反馈延迟等特点,进一步加剧了这些交际挑战。本研究为理解文化维度与数字化学习环境的互动关系提供了新视角,并为国际汉语教师创建更具文化敏感性的线上课堂提供了实践启示。

关键词: 跨文化交际; 线上汉语教学; 来华留学生; 霍夫斯泰德文化维度理论; 北京师范大学

Introduction

The rapid expansion of international Chinese language education has positioned cross-cultural communication as a central concern for educators and researchers alike. As China's global influence continues to grow, an increasing number of international students pursue Chinese language studies at Chinese universities, creating diverse multilingual and multicultural classroom environments (Li & Zhu, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transformation by necessitating a sudden shift to online teaching modalities, fundamentally altering the dynamics of teacher-student interaction across cultural boundaries (Moorhouse et al., 2021). Online learning environments present unique challenges for cross-cultural communication, as digital platforms reduce the availability of non-verbal cues, limit spontaneous interaction, and create technological barriers that may disproportionately affect students from different cultural backgrounds (Jiang & Dewaele, 2022).

Previous research on cross-cultural communication in Chinese language education has primarily focused on face-to-face classroom settings and teacher perspectives (Chen, 2018; Zu, 2017). Studies examining international students' experiences have largely centered on Western learners, with limited attention to Southeast Asian students whose cultural backgrounds may share significant similarities with Chinese culture (Wang & Lin, 2022). Furthermore, existing applications of Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory in educational contexts have been criticized for treating culture as static and homogeneous, overlooking individual variation and contextual adaptation (McSweeney, 2002). The intersection of online learning environments and cross-cultural communication among Asian international students in China remains underexplored, representing a significant gap in the literature. While Hofstede's framework has been expanded to six dimensions, the original four dimensions remain particularly relevant for examining teacher-student communication patterns in educational settings, as they directly address issues of authority, uncertainty, group dynamics, and social expectations that are central to classroom interaction (Hofstede et al., 2010).

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the cross-cultural communication experiences of Thai international students enrolled in online Chinese language courses at Beijing Normal University during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thailand and China share historical, cultural, and religious connections that distinguish Thai students' experiences from those of Western learners, yet this population has received limited scholarly attention (Phantharakphong & Pothitha, 2014). By employing Hofstede's four cultural dimensions as an analytical lens while remaining attentive to individual variation and contextual factors, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how cultural values interact with digital learning environments to shape cross-cultural communication. The study contributes to both theoretical understanding of cross-cultural communication in technology-mediated education and practical guidance for international Chinese language educators.

Objectives

(1) To investigate cross-cultural communication phenomena that occur in the process of online teaching between Chinese teachers and Thai students at Beijing Normal University.

(2) To identify the underlying causes of these cross-cultural communication phenomena, based on Hofstede's four cultural dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism vs. collectivism, and masculinity vs. femininity.

(3) To understand Thai students' perspectives on cultural similarities and differences between China and Thailand in the context of online learning.

(4) To provide insights and suggestions for international Chinese teachers to better address cross-cultural communication issues in online teaching and to create more effective teaching strategies for non-native Chinese learners.

Scope of the study

This study focused on Thai international students enrolled at Beijing Normal University who had completed at least one full semester of online Chinese language instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022). The research was confined to the context of synchronous online learning delivered through platforms such as Tencent Meeting and Zoom, excluding asynchronous learning activities. The investigation employed Hofstede's four cultural dimensions as the primary analytical framework, selected for their direct relevance to educational communication patterns; the additional dimensions of long-term orientation and indulgence were not included as they are less directly applicable to classroom interaction dynamics.

Several delimitations should be acknowledged. The study was restricted to Thai students at a single institution, limiting generalizability to other nationalities or institutional contexts. Data collection relied exclusively on retrospective self-reports through interviews, without direct classroom observation or quantitative measures. The researcher's Thai nationality, while facilitating rapport and cultural understanding, may have introduced insider bias in data interpretation. The findings should therefore be understood as providing in-depth insights into a specific context rather than broadly generalizable conclusions. Future research employing mixed methods, multiple sites, and diverse nationality groups would strengthen the evidence base for cross-cultural communication in online Chinese language education.

Literature review

1. Cross-Cultural Communication in Online Education

The shift to online education has fundamentally transformed cross-cultural communication dynamics in international classrooms. Wang and Chen (2020) found that online learning environments create a "double disadvantage" for international students, who must navigate both linguistic challenges and the reduced social presence afforded by digital platforms. Jiang and Dewaele (2022) demonstrated that non-verbal

communication cues, critical for cross-cultural understanding, are significantly diminished in video-mediated instruction, leading to increased misunderstandings and reduced opportunities for clarification. Research by Moorhouse et al. (2021) on emergency remote teaching during the pandemic revealed that students from high-context cultures, including those from East and Southeast Asia, experienced particular difficulties adapting to the more explicit communication styles required in online settings.

Studies specifically examining online Chinese language instruction for international students remain limited. Li and Zhu (2023) investigated Chinese language learners' experiences during the pandemic and found that students from collectivist cultures reported feeling isolated and disconnected from their learning communities. Chen and Wang (2021) noted that the absence of face-to-face interaction reduced opportunities for incidental cultural learning that typically occurs through daily campus life. These findings suggest that online environments may paradoxically increase the salience of cultural differences while reducing opportunities for organic cross-cultural adaptation.

2. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, originally developed through research on IBM employees across 40 countries, has become one of the most influential frameworks for understanding cultural differences (Hofstede, 1980, 2001). The original model proposed four dimensions: power distance (acceptance of hierarchical authority), uncertainty avoidance (tolerance for ambiguity), individualism versus collectivism (emphasis on individual versus group identity), and masculinity versus femininity (emphasis on achievement versus care). Later expansions added long-term versus short-term orientation and indulgence versus restraint (Hofstede et al., 2010).

The framework has been extensively applied in educational research to explain differences in learning styles, classroom participation, and teacher-student relationships across cultures. Signorini et al. (2009) used Hofstede's dimensions to analyze Chinese students' adaptation to Western educational contexts, finding that power distance significantly influenced willingness to question teachers. Joy and Kolb (2009) demonstrated correlations between cultural dimensions and preferred learning styles across 533 participants from seven countries.

However, Hofstede's framework has attracted substantial criticism. McSweeney (2002) challenged the methodological foundations, arguing that organizational culture within IBM was confounded with national culture. Scholars have noted that the framework treats cultures as homogeneous and static, ignoring internal diversity, generational change, and individual variation (Fang, 2003). The ecological fallacy applying national-level findings to predict individual behavior—represents a persistent concern (Brewer & Venaik, 2014). Despite these limitations, the framework remains useful as a starting point for cultural analysis when applied reflexively, with attention to individual variation and contextual factors, rather than as a deterministic predictor of behavior (Minkov & Hofstede, 2011).

3. Thai International Students in Chinese Higher Education

Thailand has become a significant source country for international students in China, driven by geographic proximity, economic ties, and growing recognition of Chinese language proficiency as valuable human capital (Luo & Yang, 2021). Thai students constitute one of the largest ASEAN nationality groups studying in Chinese universities, with particular concentrations in language and humanities programs. Beijing Normal University, as a leading institution for teacher education and humanities, attracts substantial numbers of Thai students pursuing Chinese language and education degrees.

Cultural similarities between Thailand and China have been noted by several scholars. Both countries are characterized as high-context, collectivist societies with significant power distance and emphasis on social harmony (Komin, 1990; Phuong-Mai et al., 2005). Buddhist values influence both cultures' approaches to interpersonal relations, including respect for elders, conflict avoidance, and maintenance of "face" (Phantharakphong & Pothitha, 2014). However, these apparent similarities may mask subtle differences that become salient in educational contexts. Wang and Lin (2022) suggested that the perception of cultural similarity may actually impede Thai students' conscious adaptation strategies, as they assume cultural competence that may not exist in specific academic domains.

4. Synthesis and Research Gap

The reviewed literature reveals several gaps that the present study addresses. First, while cross-cultural communication in Chinese language education has received attention, studies focusing specifically on online contexts remain scarce. Second, research on international students in China has predominantly examined Western learners, with insufficient attention to Southeast Asian students whose cultural backgrounds may interact differently with Chinese academic culture. Third, applications of Hofstede's framework in Chinese language education have rarely incorporated critical awareness of the theory's limitations or attended to individual variation within cultural groups. This study contributes by examining Thai students' experiences in online Chinese language learning through a critically informed application of Hofstede's dimensions, attending to both cultural patterns and individual differences while acknowledging the specific constraints of the online learning environment.

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a descriptive phenomenological approach, to investigate the lived experiences of Thai international students engaging in cross-cultural communication during online Chinese language instruction. Qualitative methodology was selected because the research aimed to understand subjective experiences and meaning-making processes rather than to measure frequencies or establish causal relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenological orientation allowed for in-depth exploration of how participants perceived, interpreted, and responded to cross-cultural communication situations in their online learning experiences.

2. Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive sampling from the population of Thai students enrolled at Beijing Normal University. The selection criteria required that participants had completed at least one full semester of online Chinese language instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic and were willing to discuss their cross-cultural communication experiences in detail. At the time of data collection, 17 Thai students were enrolled at the university across various programs. Of these, 9 students met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate. The sample included 4 undergraduate students, 3 master's students, and 2 doctoral students, providing perspectives across different academic levels. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Participant Demographics

ID	Gender	Program	Major	Online Semesters
P1	Female	Undergraduate	Chinese Language	3 semesters
P2	Female	Undergraduate	Chinese Language	2 semesters
P3	Male	Undergraduate	Chinese Language Education	3 semesters
P4	Female	Undergraduate	Chinese Language	2 semesters
P5	Female	Master's	Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages	4 semesters
P6	Male	Master's	Chinese Linguistics	3 semesters
P7	Female	Master's	Comparative Literature	2 semesters
P8	Male	Doctoral	Chinese Language Education	4 semesters
P9	Female	Doctoral	Applied Linguistics	4 semesters

3. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between March and May 2022. All interviews were conducted in Thai, the participants' native language, to facilitate comfortable and detailed expression. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, with an average duration of 62 minutes. All interviews were conducted via video call (Tencent Meeting or Zoom), recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim.

The interview protocol was developed based on Hofstede's four cultural dimensions, with questions designed to elicit concrete experiences rather than abstract opinions. The protocol included the following topic areas:

For power distance, participants were asked about their experiences addressing and communicating with teachers, expressing disagreement or asking questions, and their perceptions of appropriate teacher-student relationships in online settings. For uncertainty avoidance, questions explored how participants

handled unclear instructions, new or unfamiliar learning tasks, and unexpected changes in online course arrangements. For individualism versus collectivism, the interview examined preferences for individual versus group work in online contexts, experiences of collaboration with classmates from different cultural backgrounds, and sense of belonging to the learning community. For masculinity versus femininity, participants discussed perceptions of competition versus cooperation in online classes, gender dynamics in classroom participation, and approaches to helping classmates or seeking help. Additionally, participants were asked about language barriers, technological challenges, and any other factors they perceived as influencing their cross-cultural communication experiences.

4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). In the first phase (familiarization), transcripts were read multiple times while noting initial impressions and potential patterns. In the second phase (generating initial codes), the data were systematically coded using both deductive codes derived from Hofstede's dimensions and inductive codes emerging from the data. Coding was performed manually using color-coded annotations.

In the third phase (searching for themes), codes were collated into potential themes organized around the four cultural dimensions while remaining open to cross-cutting themes. In the fourth phase (reviewing themes), themes were refined through re-reading relevant extracts and ensuring coherence. In the fifth phase (defining and naming themes), each theme was clearly articulated with supporting evidence from the data. In the sixth phase (producing the report), themes were organized into a coherent narrative with illustrative quotations. All quotations presented in the results were translated from Thai to English by the researcher and verified through back-translation by a bilingual colleague.

5. Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. For credibility, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with three participants who confirmed that interpretations accurately reflected their experiences. Prolonged engagement with the data through multiple readings and coding iterations helped ensure thorough analysis. Peer debriefing sessions with a colleague experienced in qualitative cross-cultural research provided external perspective on emerging interpretations.

For transferability, thick description of the research context, participants, and procedures allows readers to assess applicability to other settings. For dependability, an audit trail documenting all research decisions, coding iterations, and analytical memos was maintained. For confirmability, the researcher engaged in reflexive journaling to acknowledge and bracket potential biases stemming from shared Thai nationality and educational experiences in China.

6. Researcher Positionality

The researcher is a Thai national who has studied Chinese at Beijing Normal University, sharing cultural and experiential background with participants. This insider position facilitated rapport-building, access to nuanced cultural meanings, and interpretation of implicit communication patterns. However, it also presented risks of projecting personal experiences onto participants' accounts and overlooking aspects that seemed "obvious" to a cultural insider. To address these concerns, the researcher maintained reflexive awareness throughout data collection and analysis, explicitly questioned assumptions, and sought external perspectives through peer debriefing. Interview questions were designed to elicit concrete experiences and specific examples rather than relying on shared cultural assumptions.

Research Results

The findings are organized according to Hofstede's four cultural dimensions, with attention to individual variation and contextual factors influencing cross-cultural communication in the online learning environment. Direct quotations from participants illustrate key themes and demonstrate the range of experiences within the sample.

1. Power Distance: Respect, Deference, and Constrained Participation

All nine participants demonstrated behaviors reflecting high power distance in their interactions with teachers, consistent with both Thai and Chinese cultural norms regarding respect for authority and seniority. However, participants varied in how they experienced and interpreted these patterns.

Regarding forms of address, participants uniformly reported using formal titles (laoshi/老师 in Chinese, khru/ครู or ajarn/อาจารย์ in Thai contexts) when addressing teachers, never using first names or nicknames. P3 explained: *"It would be unthinkable to call a teacher by their first name. In Thai culture and Chinese culture both, this would be extremely disrespectful. Even though we're all behind screens, the relationship doesn't change they are still our teachers and deserve proper respect."*

More significantly, power distance manifested in participants' reluctance to express disagreement or ask challenging questions during online classes. P5, a master's student, described this pattern:

"When I disagree with something the teacher says, I don't speak up in class. It feels like challenging them in front of everyone. Instead, I might ask a classmate later, or just accept the teacher's view. Online makes this even harder because everyone can see your face on screen when you speak there's nowhere to hide."

However, doctoral students P8 and P9 reported greater willingness to engage in academic discussion with teachers, suggesting that academic level and role expectations mediated the expression of power distance. P9 noted: *"As a PhD student, I know I'm supposed to develop my own ideas and engage critically. But I still do it carefully I frame my points as questions rather than disagreements."*

The online environment appeared to amplify power distance effects for most participants. Reduced non-verbal cues made it difficult to read teachers' openness to questions, while the performative nature of speaking on camera increased anxiety about appearing disrespectful.

2. Uncertainty Avoidance

Participants demonstrated varying levels of uncertainty avoidance that correlated with academic level and Chinese language proficiency. Undergraduate students generally showed higher uncertainty avoidance, preferring explicit instruction and structured tasks.

P1 (undergraduate) expressed a strong preference for following teacher guidance: *"When the teacher gives an assignment, I want to know exactly what they expect. How long should it be? What format? If it's unclear, I get anxious. In online classes, it's harder to ask for clarification because you have to unmute yourself and everyone is watching."*

P2 described a coping strategy: *"When instructions are unclear, I wait to see what other students do, or I ask a Thai classmate in our group chat. I don't want to look stupid by asking the teacher something obvious."*

Graduate students reported greater comfort with ambiguity, though this comfort had limits. P6 (master's) explained: *"I'm more willing now to try things my own way first, then adjust based on feedback. But for major assignments like thesis chapters, I still need clear guidance the stakes are too high to guess."*

Technical uncertainties specific to online learning created additional stress. P4 described: *"Sometimes the connection cuts out and I miss instructions. Or I can't tell if the teacher is finished talking or just pausing. In a physical classroom, you can read body language, but online you're never quite sure what's happening."*

Notably, participants who reported lower uncertainty avoidance also tended to report stronger Chinese language proficiency, suggesting that linguistic confidence enabled greater tolerance for academic ambiguity.

3. Individualism versus Collectivism

A striking finding was the situational shift from collectivist to individualist orientations in the online learning context. While participants generally identified with collectivist values, seven of nine reported preferring individual over group work for online assignments a pattern they attributed to practical constraints rather than cultural preference.

P7 articulated this tension: *"In Thailand, I always preferred group projects. Working together, sharing ideas, supporting each other that's how I learn best. But online, group work is frustrating. Different time zones, unstable internet, people who don't respond to messages for hours. It's easier to just do it myself, even though that's not my preference."*

P3 described the loss of informal interaction: *"What I miss most is the casual talk before and after class, eating lunch together, studying in the library with classmates. Online, everything is scheduled you join the meeting, you listen, you leave. There's no natural community building."*

However, two participants (P8, P9) maintained collaborative practices in the online environment. P8 explained: *"My Thai classmates and I created our own study group on WeChat. We meet every week*

online to discuss our work, help each other with difficult concepts, share resources. The formal classes are individual, but we made our own community.”

These findings suggest that collectivist cultural values remained intact, but the constraints of online learning environments reduced opportunities for their expression, leading to apparently individualist behavior as an adaptive response.

4. Masculinity versus Femininity

Participants generally oriented toward the “feminine” pole of Hofstede’s dimension, emphasizing cooperation, mutual support, and quality of life over competition and achievement. This pattern was consistent across gender.

P5 described the classroom atmosphere: *“There’s not much competition between students—at least not openly. If someone is struggling, we help each other. I’ve shared my notes with classmates many times, and they’ve helped me too. Even Chinese classmates are usually helpful and cooperative.”*

Regarding gender dynamics, participants reported observing relatively equal participation by male and female students in online classes. P6 (male) commented: *“I don’t think gender affects how people participate online. Maybe women speak up a bit more actually—they seem more comfortable expressing their ideas in the chat function.”*

Participants consciously avoided potentially sensitive topics in online discussions. P9 noted: *“When discussions touch on gender or social issues, I stay quiet. Not because I don’t have opinions, but because it’s easy to be misunderstood in a cross-cultural setting, especially online where tone is hard to convey. Better to focus on the academic content.”*

This dimension appeared least salient in generating cross-cultural communication challenges, possibly because Thai and Chinese academic cultures share similar expectations regarding cooperation and interpersonal harmony.

5. Additional Factors: Language, Technology, and Individual Differences

Beyond the four cultural dimensions, participants identified several additional factors influencing their cross-cultural communication experiences. Chinese language proficiency emerged as a critical mediator. P2 explained: *“When my Chinese was weaker, I was afraid to speak in class not just because of respect for the teacher, but because I was embarrassed about making language mistakes. Now that my Chinese is better, I participate more, but I still think twice before speaking in front of native speakers.”*

Technology created both barriers and opportunities. P4 described communication through text-based channels: *“Actually, I’m more comfortable writing in the chat than speaking. I can take time to think about my words, check my grammar. Some of my classmates who are shy in person are very active in the chat.”*

Individual personality also shaped experiences. P3 identified as naturally introverted: *“I don’t speak much in class even in Thailand. It’s my personality, not culture. Online actually suits me because there’s*

less pressure to perform.” In contrast, P5 found the online format constraining: *“I’m usually very talkative and social. Online learning feels suffocating I can’t build real relationships with teachers or classmates.”*

These findings highlight that cultural dimensions interact with individual characteristics, language ability, and technological factors to produce diverse experiences within the participant group.

Discussion

This study investigated the cross-cultural communication experiences of Thai international students in online Chinese language courses through the lens of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. The findings contribute to understanding how cultural values interact with digital learning environments, while also revealing important individual and contextual variation that complicates purely cultural explanations.

1. Cultural Similarity as Double-Edged Sword

Consistent with previous characterizations of Thai and Chinese cultures as sharing high power distance and collectivist orientations (Hofstede et al., 2010), participants demonstrated respect for hierarchical relationships and preference for social harmony. This cultural similarity appeared to minimize overt communication conflicts participants reported few instances of direct misunderstanding or cultural clash with teachers. However, the findings suggest this similarity may function as a “double-edged sword.” Shared values of deference and harmony, while preventing conflict, also constrained open dialogue, critical questioning, and spontaneous participation. This pattern aligns with Wang and Lin’s (2022) observation that perceived cultural similarity may reduce conscious adaptation efforts, potentially limiting learning opportunities that might arise from navigating cultural difference. The phenomenon of “polite silence” identified by Jia and Li (1997) was evident across the sample, with students choosing not to speak rather than risk appearing disrespectful or creating social discomfort.

2. Online Environment as Amplifier of Cultural Tendencies

The online learning environment appeared to amplify rather than attenuate culturally-patterned communication behaviors. Reduced non-verbal cues made it more difficult for students to read teacher openness to questions or gauge appropriate moments to speak. The performative nature of speaking on camera, visible to all participants, increased anxiety about public self-presentation. Technical uncertainties (connection problems, audio delays) added cognitive load that further inhibited spontaneous participation. These findings extend the work of Moorhouse et al. (2021) on high-context culture students in emergency remote learning, suggesting that the communicative demands of online environments may disproportionately challenge students accustomed to reading subtle social cues. The “double disadvantage” described by Wang and Chen (2020) navigating both linguistic and technological barriers was evident in participants’ accounts, though cultural factors added a third layer of complexity.

A key finding was the situational shift toward individualist behavior in online learning, despite participants' identification with collectivist values. This pattern challenges static applications of Hofstede's framework that assume consistent cultural orientations across contexts. Participants clearly preferred collaborative learning and valued community belonging, but practical constraints of online learning (time zone differences, technological limitations, reduced informal interaction) made collective approaches difficult to enact. Some participants actively created alternative community structures (informal study groups, Thai student chat groups) to satisfy collectivist needs that formal online classes did not meet. This finding supports critiques of Hofstede's framework as overly deterministic (McSweeney, 2002) while suggesting that cultural values remain operative as preferences even when behavioral expression is constrained by context.

3. Individual Variation Within Cultural Patterns

The findings revealed substantial individual variation within the Thai student group, challenging homogeneous treatment of national culture. Academic level was associated with differences in uncertainty avoidance and willingness to engage teachers in academic discussion. Language proficiency mediated the expression of power distance and uncertainty avoidance students with stronger Chinese felt more confident participating despite cultural reservations about challenging authority. Personality traits (introversion/extroversion) shaped how individuals experienced online communication, with some finding it liberating and others constraining. These patterns support Brewer and Venkat's (2014) caution against ecological fallacy in applying cultural dimensions to individuals. Cultural frameworks like Hofstede's remain useful for identifying tendencies and generating hypotheses but should not be treated as deterministic predictors of individual behavior.

4. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to cultural dimensions theory by demonstrating how cultural orientations interact with technological mediation. The findings suggest that Hofstede's dimensions remain relevant for understanding cross-cultural communication in digital contexts, but their expression is shaped by affordances and constraints of the learning environment. The concept of "situational collectivism" (or more broadly, situational cultural orientation) may help explain apparent discrepancies between cultural values and behaviors in technologically-mediated contexts. Future theoretical development should attend to the dynamic interplay between cultural dispositions, individual characteristics, and contextual factors rather than treating culture as a static determinant of behavior.

Practical Implications for Educators

Limitations

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. The study focused on Thai students at one institution with a small sample (n=9), limiting generalizability to broader populations. Retrospective self-reports may

involve recall bias and researcher cultural bias, though reflexive methods addressed the latter. Data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic represents an unusual context that may not reflect typical online learning. The four-dimensional framework, while justified for educational focus, may miss dynamics captured by additional dimensions of long-term orientation and indulgence.

Conclusion

This qualitative study investigated cross-cultural communication experiences of Thai international students in online Chinese language courses at Beijing Normal University, using Hofstede's four cultural dimensions as an analytical framework. The findings revealed that cultural similarities between Thailand and China particularly shared values of respect for authority and social harmony minimized overt communication conflicts but simultaneously constrained open dialogue and spontaneous participation. The online learning environment amplified these patterns by reducing non-verbal cues and increasing performance anxiety. A notable finding was the situational shift from collectivist preferences to individualist behaviors, driven by practical constraints of online learning rather than cultural change.

The study contributes to understanding how cultural dimensions interact with digital learning contexts, demonstrating that Hofstede's framework remains useful for identifying patterns while requiring attention to individual variation and contextual factors. For educators, the findings highlight the importance of creating multiple participation channels, explicitly welcoming diverse communication styles, and attending to both cultural patterns and individual differences in online international classrooms.

Future research should expand to include students from other ASEAN countries to enable cross-national comparison, employ mixed methods including classroom observation and quantitative measures of cultural orientation, conduct longitudinal tracking of students' adaptation over multiple semesters, and incorporate teacher perspectives alongside student experiences. Such research would deepen understanding of cross-cultural communication dynamics in the increasingly important context of online international education.

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