

## Research Article

# Intercultural Sensitivity of Chinese Graduate Students during Study Abroad in Thailand

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### Abstract

The advent of globalization has been a significant phenomenon that influences the internationalization of higher education systems worldwide, particularly through study abroad programs. Previous studies indicate that globalization can also increase the degree of intercultural sensitivity of students studying abroad. This paper investigates the degree of intercultural sensitivity of Chinese graduate students during their studies in Thailand, employing an explanatory sequential design. A total of 264 students were selected through simple random sampling to complete a questionnaire, while five participants were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews. Two instruments were used for data collection: a questionnaire and online individual interviews. The questionnaire demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .86). The interview questions were validated by three experts. Quantitative data analysis was performed using mean, standard deviation, and an independent t-test, while qualitative data were examined using content analysis.

The findings revealed that the overall degree of intercultural sensitivity was high ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 0.22$ ). When examining individual dimensions, students placed the greatest emphasis on respect for cultural differences ( $M = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 0.45$ ), followed by engagement in intercultural interactions ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 0.36$ ). Interestingly, the dimension of enjoyment in intercultural interactions received the lowest score ( $M = 2.18$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ). This finding

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reflects that although students recognize and respect cultural differences, they may still experience discomfort or lack of confidence when engaging in cross-cultural interactions. In terms of gender comparisons, no statistically significant differences were identified. The results suggest that study abroad experiences enhance students' degree of intercultural sensitivity, particularly in fostering respect for cultural differences and engagement in intercultural interactions, even though emotional comfort in such settings may not progress to the same degree. These findings highlight the need for an intercultural support mechanism to help students fully benefit from cross-cultural experiences.

**Keywords:** *Intercultural Sensitivity, Internationalization of Higher Education, Study Abroad*

## Introduction

In the world of growing multicultural and globalized environments, all aspects of development including international education can be seen as one of the borderless social progress. One priority of institutions of higher education is to foster intercultural understanding and values. As Nguyen, Trinh, and Nguyen (2023) state that success of diverse cultural understanding is a crucial aspect when people interact with each other in the modern era. Therefore, study overseas can be an alternative for students to enhance knowledge exchange and navigate global society that encompasses diversity of culture. In November 2019, the first United Nations Convention on Higher Education was adopted to improve mobility for millions of students to enroll in higher education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2019). This is to strengthen not only the geographical, humanitarian, scientific, and socioeconomic ties between States Parties but also educational and cultural practices. Back in 2017, the Belt and Road Initiative in China encourages more Chinese students to study abroad. According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics, in 2023 a total number of approximately 1,021,303 Chinese students studied abroad (UNESCO, 2019), and the most popular study abroad destination is the United States of America. Even though Thailand is not one of the top ten destinations for Chinese students to study abroad, the Office of the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation reported that the highest number of international students studying in Thai higher education institutions was Chinese, accounting for 21,419 students in 2022 (Sawasdee Thailand, 2023).

During a sojourn, students inevitably encounter not only academic difficulties but cultural challenges. The academic challenges could be level of adaptation to different

educational systems, managing coursework, and balancing academic expectations with cultural adjustments (Taylor, Brown, & Medora, 2023). In cultural dimensions, intercultural conflict frustrations might arise due to insufficient knowledge to deal with culture-based conflict communication (Ting-Toomey, 2012). Thus, the likelihood of possible encounters such as power distance, miscommunication in cultural values or communication behaviours could affect the enhancement of intercultural sensitivity.

Intercultural sensitivity was defined as a positive emotion or feeling that enhances individuals to acknowledge and respect cultural differences (Jackson, 2018). One of the significant intercultural sensitivity concepts is when a person is ready to accept other culture's aspects that are similar to one's own culture. This view is further corroborated by Bhawuk's (2023), who proposed that intercultural sensitivity is the ability to observe cultural differences, the ability to empathize, and the ability to modify one's behavior to act appropriately in the host culture. Melle and Ferreira (2023) also considered that intercultural sensitivity plays a crucial role in enhancing the educational experience in higher education by fostering effective communication and understanding among diverse student population, and this can lead to growing awareness of cross-cultural differences. Finally, Chen and Hu (2023) contended that interculturally sensitive persons are able to achieve the level of dual identity and enjoy cultural differences. Therefore, the concepts of intercultural sensitivity can be focused on being open-minded towards cultural differences and understanding cultural behaviors.

The aforementioned presents the concepts of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence that are interconnected. Intercultural sensitivity refers to the awareness and understanding of cultural differences, enabling individuals to focus on awareness and emotional response to cultural differences (Melle & Ferreira, 2023). However, intercultural competence encompasses a broader set of skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for effective interaction across diverse cultural contexts. There is a strong connection between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence. Melle and Ferreira (2023) proposed that if students become more sensitive to cultural differences, their ability to engage effectively in intercultural interactions also improves. More importantly, internationalization practices in higher education significantly contribute to enhancing students' intercultural sensitivity and competence. These practices include study abroad programs, multicultural group projects, and diverse classroom discussions, which expose students to various cultural perspectives.

In Thailand, there has been a significant increase in the number of Asian students attending Thai universities over the past two decades (Pongsin et al., 2023). As earlier mentioned, the number of Chinese students studying in Thailand constitutes the largest group of international students. As a result, this influx of Chinese students has had a significant impact on Thai economy. Even though some research on intercultural sensitivity conducted in Thai context has been well investigated (Bosuwon, 2017, Wattanavorakijkul, 2020; Engchuan, Pengloon, Yenphech, Phoowong, & Som-In, 2023) little research has been conducted to measure intercultural sensitivity of Chinese graduate students studying abroad in Thailand. This study, therefore, can shed light on how Thailand's higher education sector reshapes its curriculum design, intercultural communication, and educational administration.

## Objective

To examine the degree of intercultural sensitivity of Chinese graduate students after study abroad in Thailand

## Literature Review

### Intercultural Sensitivity

The concept of intercultural sensitivity has been investigated since the 1950s within the broader frameworks of intercultural competence, effectiveness, and adaptation (Chen & Starosta, 2000). Scholars have approached this concept from diverse theoretical perspectives. For instance, Bennett (1986) introduced the model of intercultural sensitivity, which consisted of six stages: denial of cultural difference, defense against cultural difference, minimization of cultural difference, acceptance of cultural difference, adaptation to cultural differences, and integration of cultural difference. This model can be recognised as a great success since each stage of development can be used to diagnose levels of intercultural sensitivity. Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) interpreted intercultural sensitivity through the lens of individualism and collectivism, proposing that it encompasses three core components: comprehension of culturally distinct behaviors, openness to cultural differences, and behavioral adaptability within the host culture. Similarly, Altshuler, Sussman, and Kachur (2003) view intercultural sensitivity as the ability to distinguish cultural differences. This sensitivity is seen as a prerequisite for behavioral change and the development of intercultural competence.

Chen and Starosta (2000) further developed the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS), proposing five dimensions: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. The scale can be seen as foundational affective element of intercultural competence which is essential for fostering effective and respectful cross-cultural communication. In this model, intercultural sensitivity is situated within the affective domain—one of the three primary components of intercultural communication competence. This affective orientation facilitates more appropriate and effective communication across cultures. Furthermore, Chen and Starosta (2000) proposed that intercultural sensitivity is a foundational element of intercultural communication competence and posited that individuals with higher levels of intercultural sensitivity are better positioned to become confident and globally minded communicators.

Intercultural sensitivity has been recognized as a vital competency, essential for promoting the development of individuals a global citizens. Although the ISS developed by Chen and Starosta (2000) has not been empirically validated within the Thai context, it is widely employed in related research. Therefore, adopting the concept of Chen and Starosta's intercultural sensitivity scale can provide valuable insight into the phenomenon of intercultural sensitivity among Chinese students.

### **Study Abroad**

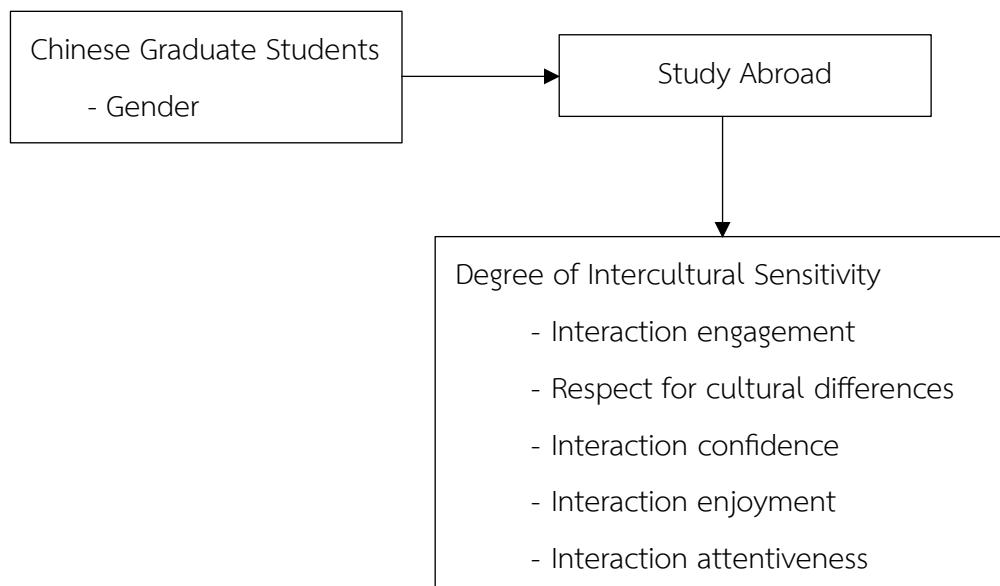
Studying abroad offers not only academic training but also a profound transformative learning experience. During study abroad, students can acquire new knowledge both inside and outside the classroom. However, encountering various challenges, including language barriers and cultural diversity can be either a positive or negative impacts on students' engagement with people from different cultural backgrounds (Bolen, 2001). With accelerating globalization, more institutions of higher education have created more opportunities for international experience (Jackson, 2015), however, the results of studying abroad may differ based on individual factors such as motivation, learning habits, intelligence, personality, family background, and the environment. These differences can contribute to variability in the learning experiences and performance of students participating in overseas programs (Jackson, 2018).

Study abroad programs can also demonstrate intercultural growth and experience. Students are more likely to have increased opportunity to develop or enhance their empathy and positive attitudes toward people from different cultures while studying abroad

(Lambert, 1994). Spending time during study abroad can enhance awareness of cultural differences, empathy for other cultures, ability to effectively interact with people from diverse backgrounds, and proficiency in foreign languages (Spenader, Ruis, & Bohn-Gettler, 2022). According to Deardorff (2006), intercultural adaptability and sensitivity are crucial components of intercultural competence, which have gained prominence as a key responsibility for universities in preparing students for success in a globally competitive environment. With the rise of multiculturalism, study abroad opportunities can foster intercultural sensitivity and competence to facilitate understanding and communication across cultures. These competencies not only help students understand their own cultural identity but also cultivate an appreciation for individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds, interests, and perspectives.

### Conceptual Framework

This study is framed by the conceptual framework of intercultural sensitivity developed by Chen and Starosta (2000). The model comprises five factors: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness.



## Methodology

This is a mixed-methods study employing explanatory design (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2016), which the questionnaire was carried out and followed up by the interview. The justification for using this design was due to the required additional information to expand on the results of the quantitative data. These two types of data were analyzed separately, with the qualitative data could help refine the quantitative findings.

### Population and Samples

The population was Chinese students who were enrolling in the course “English for Graduate studies 2”, which was a required course at Shinawatra University, Thailand, in academic year 2024. The course was a general English proficiency course, which specific content related to culture or international communication was not emphasized. The total number of population was approximately 700. Simple random sampling was employed in the study, and the number of questionnaire samples was 264 (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970), which female students accounted for 60.60% ( $n = 160$ ) while 39.40% ( $n = 104$ ) of students were male. The five interviewees were also the representatives of the population who were purposively selected by “criterion-based selection” suggested by LeCompte, Preissle, and Tesch (1993). In this study, the researchers developed a set of criteria that the interviewees must possess. For example, the interviewees should not have any English language barrier, and they were willing to participate in the online interview. Despite the limited sample size of five interviewees, the study could still produce thick and rich data. All interviewees were informed of the key research ethical issues such as anonymity, sensitive information, and ownership of the data prior to the online individual semi-structured interview. The interview was conducted in both English and Chinese, with the assistance of a bilingual Chinese interviewer who facilitated communication for the interviewees requiring language support.

### Research Instruments

There were two instruments in the study: the 5-Likert scale questionnaire of ISS developed and validated by Chen and Starosta (2000) and semi-structured interview developed by the researchers on the basis of what constructs were measured (LeCompte et al., 1993). The justification for adopting this questionnaire was that the scale demonstrated high internal consistency with 0.86 reliability coefficient. Moreover, moderate correlations with related measures can support for the validity (Chen & Starosta, 2000). The questionnaire was also tested with German samples by using confirmatory factor analysis, and the results

showed that the instrument was satisfactory (Fritz, Möllenbergs, & Chen, 2000). In addition, it has been widely adopted as a tool for measuring intercultural sensitivity since the development in 2000. There were the total of 24 items in relation to the five measures of the concept of intercultural sensitivity, which were interaction engagement, cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. Items 2, 4, 7, 9, 12, 15, 18, 20, and 22 were reverse-coded. The categorization of 24 items were classified into five factors (see Table 1).

**Table 1** Factors of Intercultural Sensitivity

Factors	Items
Interaction engagement	1, 11, 13, 21, 22, 23, 24
Respect for cultural differences	2, 7, 8, 16, 18, 20
Interaction confidence	3, 4, 5, 6, 10
Interaction enjoyment	9, 12, 15
Interaction attentiveness	14, 17, 19

In this study, the questionnaire was back-translated into Chinese to avoid language barrier. It was written in two languages: English and Chinese.

Regarding the interview, there were the total of 15 semi-structured questions in relation to five factors of intercultural sensitivity scale. The questions were validated by three experts in the fields of education and teaching English as a second language. Minor revisions were made before the main study.

### Data Analysis

The questionnaire was distributed to 264 Chinese graduate students enrolled in “English 2” course during the first semester of academic year 2024. All participants were provided with informed consent. It took one week to complete in-class questionnaire collection. Subsequently, five respondents were purposively selected for online semi-structured interviews, which key ethical considerations—including anonymity, sensitivity of information, and data ownership—were communicated. The individual interviews were conducted online in both English and Chinese, with support from a Chinese-speaking interviewer for translation when needed. It took approximately 30 minutes for each interview session. After the completion of data collection, the quantitative data from the questionnaire

was analyzed by descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation), while the qualitative data from the interview was analyzed by using content analysis. This analysis could be used to give the researchers insights into the details of students' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours regarding intercultural sensitivity, leading to validating the findings of the study. To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative data, the reliability was obtained by interrater reliability. Due to the small sample size, the interview data was checked by two raters and calculated by percent agreement, and the result of the agreement was 85%, which was acceptable (Steiner, 2004). The excerpts that did not receive the absolute agreement were dismissed. The validity was checked by interpretive validity.

## Results

The degree of intercultural sensitivity of Chinese graduate students during short-term study abroad in Thailand is shown below.

**Table 2** Gender Comparison on Degree of Intercultural Sensitivity (n = 264)

Gender	Number	Mean	SD	t	p
Male	104	3.48	0.24	1.668	0.097
Female	160	3.43	0.21		

Table 2 shows the gender comparison on degree of intercultural sensitivity, and it was found that the overall degree of intercultural sensitivity between male and female students was not statistically significant. This could reveal that gender is not a factor determining male and female students' degrees of intercultural sensitivity.

**Table 3** Overall Degree of five Factors of Intercultural Sensitivity (n = 264)

Description	Mean	SD	Degree
Interaction engagement	3.64	0.36	high
Respect for cultural differences	4.06	0.45	high
Interaction confidence	3.15	0.49	moderate
Interaction enjoyment	2.18	0.64	low
Interaction attentiveness	3.57	0.54	high
<b>Overall</b>	<b>3.45</b>	<b>0.22</b>	<b>high</b>

Table 3 shows that the overall degree of intercultural sensitivity of Chinese students was high ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 0.22$ ). Among five factors, respect for cultural differences was the highest, followed by interaction engagement, interaction attentiveness, interaction confidence, while interaction enjoyment was the lowest.

The items with the three highest mean scores of the individual factor of intercultural sensitivity are presented (see Tables 4–8).

**Table 4** Degree of Interaction Engagement ( $n = 264$ )

Item No	Description	Mean	SD	Degree
1	I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.	4.33	0.67	very high
21	I often give positive responses to my culturally different counterpart during our interaction.	3.93	0.76	high
24	I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between culturally-distinct counterpart and me.	3.41	0.91	high

Table 4 reveals that item 1: *I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures* received the highest mean score ( $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ), reflecting a strong positive attitude toward intercultural engagement among participants. This finding is supported by the interview shared by Zue, who emphasized the enjoyment he experienced when leaving his dormitory to explore local tourist attractions and engage with the surrounding cultural environment.

“If not staying in the dormitory, I spend most of my time exploring tourist spots such as Pattaya beach and gun shooting center.”

(Zue (pseudonym), interview, 2024, August 12)

The information corroborated the data given by Yi who said,

“I enjoy the beauty of Thai environment and friendliness of Thai people, and this can be a reason why I can gradually learn Thai language. I frequently visit the places I want to see. Everything is okay except the water quality that might be my concern.”

(Yi (pseudonym), interview, 2024, August 12)

Li, an English teacher in China, also expressed her enjoyment of interacting with people from different backgrounds, particularly her fondness of Thai people's kindness. She shared one memorable experience that happened a few weeks ago.

“I regularly interact with a man who stays in the same apartment. He has taught me how to swim, and the interaction shows how candid and kind he is.”

(Li (pseudonym), interview, 2024, August 12)

Li's data tended to support what Jan answered when asked if she enjoyed interacting with people or other nationalities when staying in Thailand.

“I enjoy living and exploring Thailand even though there are some language challenges I have faced particularly in healthcare context. However, I could find some ways to overcome these difficulties. Interacting with local people is no longer a problem for me anymore since I can use Google Translation.”

(Jan (pseudonym), interview, 2024, August 12)

One straightforward opinion of Michael can also be seen in the following excerpt.

“Even though I used to have a problem of cultural misunderstanding with an European man when cruising along the Chaopraya River, I still have my comfort level staying in Thailand. Interacting with people no matter they are Thai or foreigners seems to be comfortable for me.”

(Michael (pseudonym), interview, 2024, August 12)

As seen in the above excerpts, all interviewees were more likely to enjoy interacting with people from different cultures. They seemed to be positive towards what they encountered.

**Table 5** Degree of Respect for Cultural Differences (n = 264)

Item No	Description	Mean	SD	Degree
8	I respect the values of people from different cultures.	4.69	0.70	very high
16	I respect the ways people from different cultures behave.	4.52	0.68	very high
20	I think my culture is better than other cultures.	4.37	0.77	very high

As shown in Table 5, all items within this factor received very high mean scores. Item 8: *I respect the values of people from different cultures* gained the highest mean score ( $M = 4.69$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ), followed by item 16: *I respect the ways people from different cultures behave*, which also demonstrated a very high mean score ( $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ). These results suggest a consistently positive attitude towards cultural differences among participants.

Supporting this quantitative findings, interview data from Michael illustrate this perspective. Although he reported occasional language barriers when communicating with Thai individuals, he consistently expressed respect for different cultural values and practices. As he noted,

“Thai people are very warm and hospitable. Although we don’t speak the same language, we can still feel enthusiastic. For example, I took a taxi to the hotel once, but I did not know the exact location. When I showed the taxi driver the navigation on my phone, he finally understood. I was so happy. On the way, he was very keen to introduce Thai attractions to me. I like Thailand very much. I like Thai people even more.”

(Michael (pseudonym), interview, 2024, August 12)

Michael also appreciated the values of Thai people. He could also observe the uniqueness of Thai culture from his interaction with Thai people.

“Most Thai people are very patient and friendly. When the communication is achieved, I have a sense of accomplishment. I can say that one of the most rewarding aspects of studying in Thailand is the opportunity to have warm and friendly interaction. Attempting to speak Thai, even with limited proficiency, often leads me to some awkward moment of mutual understanding; however, Thai people appreciate the effort that I try to communicate in their language with them, which can lead to heartwarming interactions. Finally, I have learned that Thai people have specific voice to express respect while Chinese convey ‘respect’ through different honorific titles.”

(Michael (pseudonym), interview, 2024, August 12)

It could be concluded that despite some differences in cultural traditions, the Chinese students were more likely to respect Thai social norms and daily behaviors of Thai people.

**Table 6** Degree of Interaction Confidence (n = 264)

Item No	Description	Mean	SD	Degree
10	I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures.	3.54	0.86	high
3	I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures.	3.54	0.86	high
6	I can be sociable as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures.	2.88	0.86	moderate

As presented in Table 6, interaction confidence factor shows both high and moderate degrees among participants. Item 10 and item 3 received the highest mean score ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ). The quantitative results corroborated the interview data, particularly when participants were asked about their confidence when interacting with individuals from non-Chinese cultural backgrounds. Li, a student from Guizhou, China, reflected on her experiences and noted,

“I always feel comfortable and have confidence when dealing with Thai people. At the hotel where I stay, I use English to communicate with the hotel staff. We also share positive experience to each other. The hotel staff is kind and helpful.”

(Li (psedonym), interview, 2024, August 12)

When interacting with local people, Li was uncomfortable dealing with Thai people, and this might be a matter of language barriers. she said,

“The first few weeks in Thailand is quite difficult, and I feel uncomfortable in certain social situations due to some cultural differences, particularly in regard to communication styles. There are also some challenges with the translation. However, I feel better in the second month, and I feel more confident about my interaction with people in Thailand. After that, with my confidence, I start exploring Chiangmai and Pattaya, where I can learn different aspects of Thai culture. Both Thai and Chinese emphasize etiquette, which can be considered as an important way to express respect and friendliness. For example, Thai cuisine mainly features sour, spicy, and sweet flavors while Chinese cuisine is much more diverse, with different regions having their own distinctive styles and taste preferences.”

(Li (pseudonym), interview, 2024, August 12)

Finally, Michael, a physical education teacher shared his view.

“I have been here for 8 months, and I really enjoy the friendliness of Thai people. I once had a difficult time when I first arrive in Thailand. It is about misconception about Thailand that I heard from social platform. I learn more and more, and later on I feel more confident to interact in both Thai and English with local people. I also feel safe when dealing with Thai people.”

(Michael (pseudonym), interview, 2024, August 12)

Overall, all interviewees were more confident and relaxed after adjusting themselves to the new environment in Thailand.

**Table 7** Degree of Interaction Enjoyment (n = 264)

Item No	Description	Mean	SD	Degree
9	I get upset when interacting with people from different cultures.	2.44	0.93	low
15	I often feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures.	2.06	0.84	low
12	I often get discouraged when I am with people from different cultures	2.04	0.82	low

As seen in Table 7, the mean scores for all items under interaction enjoyment dimension are relatively low, with the highest mean shown at 2.44 (SD = 0.93) and the lowest at 2.04 (SD = 0.82). This appears to present a contradiction: while participants expressed enjoyment in interacting with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, they also reported feelings of discomfort or discouragement during such interactions. This ambivalence is further illustrated in the interview data, with the following excerpts offering qualitative support for the quantitative findings related to interaction enjoyment.

“There are some certain challenges in interacting with others in Thailand. Language barrier is the most challenging. My English proficiency is limited, so there are always some inaccuracies in understanding some expressions. To overcome this challenge, I study English

harder under the guidance of teachers. I also enroll in Thai language course to learn some basic Thai. I also use translation to improve my language expression and ability.”

(Zue (pseudonym), interview, 2024, August 12)

“Because my English is not good and I am not Thai, it is difficult to communicate with Thai people. For example, when we went to the night market to buy things, we had no way to discuss the price and products. I solved this problem through English and sign language.”

(Li (Pseudonym), interview, 2024, August 12)

“During my study in Thailand, I did face difficulties when interacting with others especially when that person did not speak English and I did not speak Thai. To solve this problem, I started learning basic Thai phrases and tried to be more patient in communication. If the situation became too difficult, I would ask a Thai speaking friend or classmate for help. This experience taught me that cross-cultural communication requires more understanding and flexibility, and it also motivated me to improve my language skills.”

(Michael (pseudonym), interview, 2024, August 12)

“I am not satisfied with the negative attitude of some service industries. For example, I often encounter taxis that do not charge by meter and refuse to take rides. And the working efficiency of relevant government agencies is a little slow, such as a long wait for visa process.”

(Jan (pseudonym), interview, 2024, August 12)

**Table 8** Degree of Interaction Attentiveness (n = 264)

Item No	Description	Mean	SD	Degree
17	I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures.	4.06	0.71	high
14	I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures.	3.83	0.72	high
19	I am sensitive to my culturally-distinct counterpart's subtle meanings during our interaction.	2.83	0.95	moderate

With respect to interaction attentiveness, Table 8 reveals that item 17 received the highest mean score ( $M = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ), indicating a high level of attentiveness during intercultural interactions. In contrast, item 19: *I am sensitive to my culturally-distinct counterpart's subtle meanings during our interaction* was rated at a moderate level ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ). This can suggest that while participants may be attentive, they might face challenges in perceiving or interpreting subtle cultural cues. In regard to the interview data, the following excerpts can support the results of interaction attentiveness.

“When I interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, I try to understand their customs, traditions, and ways of thinking, which can broaden my horizon and enhance my knowledge. It also enables me to experience the charm of diverse cultures.”

(Michael (pseudonym), interview, 2024, August 12)

“I have noticed that some Thai people strongly respect their elders, which is different from my own culture. In Thailand, people show great deference to the elderly in various ways, such as giving seats and speaking politely. This made me think about the importance of intergenerational respect. On the other hand, the friendliness and hospitality I have encountered in Thailand is similar to what I value in my own culture.”

(Jan (pseudonym), interview, 2024, August 12)

“I observe that some Thai locals have a relatively relaxed concept of time and do not emphasize the urgency and efficiency of time as much as Chinese do. This difference is particularly evident when I communicate with Thai people. They tend to focus more on enjoying life and establishing emotional connections with others, rather than rushing to complete tasks.”

(Li (pseudonym), interview, 2024, August 12)

Overall, these excerpts collectively suggest that the interviewees' responses reflect a nuanced engagement with intercultural sensitivity, including moments of both acceptance and resistance.

## Discussion

Environmental factors while studying abroad can lead to differences in students' experiences and learning (Jackson, 2018). In this study, the overall degree of students' intercultural sensitivity is high, and there is no significant difference in the degree of intercultural sensitivity between the two genders. It can be discussed that Thailand is one of the destinations for international students from Asia continent to study abroad, and the primary factors influencing the decision can be geographical advantage, favorable cost structures, education system and structure, cultural factors, and leisure activities (Ke, 2023). Despite experiencing occasional difficulties, students tend to engage in reflective thinking to understand the possible causes of these encounters, which facilitated their successful adaptation to the host culture. Thai cultural factors such as culinary preferences, religious beliefs, tradition customs and festivals, and leisure activities including visiting tourist attractions and shopping can significantly foster both intensive and extensive interactions between Chinese students, Thai locals, and international visitors. Such exposure during study abroad programs can facilitate both the quantity and quality of meaningful engagement. This experience may serve as a catalyst for the development of students' communication competencies and cultural understanding, ultimately contributing to the enhancement of all five dimensions of intercultural sensitivity (interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness). Sadiki (2022) contends that study abroad experiences can positively influence students' proficiency in the target language and their understanding of the host culture during their sojourn. In other words, cultural practices are constructed through interaction, highlighting the notion that culture itself is a socially constructed practice (Baker, 2015). Therefore, the intercultural interaction during study abroad may account for the particularly high rating of respect for cultural differences among the five factors of intercultural sensitivity.

As for the gender's degree of intercultural sensitivity, the findings indicate that both male and female students are unlikely to face challenges across all five factors of intercultural sensitivity. Within the context of study abroad in Thailand, where the educational and sociocultural environment is generally supportive, students of both genders tend to effectively overcome language and communication barriers, suggesting a degree of adaptability facilitated by immersion in the host culture. While He, Zhou, Salinitri, and Xu (2020) found that traditional Chinese values and cultural norms assign different expectations

and behavioral standards to male and female students particularly in terms of achievement and character, this study presents contrasting findings. Although environmental factor can, to some extent, pose additional challenges, the sociocultural environment in Thailand perceived by the students as friendly and safe may serve as a facilitating factor in promoting key dimensions of intercultural sensitivity. These include interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. This aligns with Chen and Hu's (2023) assertion that the cultural environment plays a significant role in fostering higher levels of intercultural sensitivity. Nonetheless, further research is warranted to explore the influence of culturally specific gender roles and behaviors among Chinese students in intercultural contexts.

The findings further suggest that study abroad experiences can significantly foster the development of intercultural sensitivity. In this study, the students engaged not only in formal academic activities but also in real-life interactions and cultural exploration, both of which contributed to heightened levels of intercultural sensitivity. While attending classes delivered in English, students simultaneously began to engage in second language socialization, gradually adopting aspects of the Thai language and culture. This process helped them become more familiar with the host environment. As Kinginger (2015 cited in Jackson, 2018) explains, exposure to local practices such as greetings, communication styles, and idiomatic expressions can deepen students' engagement with the host culture, fostering positive emotional responses that enhance their recognition and respect for cultural differences. Moreover, students' participation in real-life experiences and community-based activities in Thailand supports the idea that study abroad programs can promote both increased engagement and experiential learning. Therefore, increased engagement during study abroad programs is likely to support the development of the five factors of intercultural sensitivity.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations for Applying the Results

1. It is recommended that educators should promote cultural learning and experiential activities both within and beyond the classroom. Teachers should integrate concepts of intercultural sensitivity into their pedagogical practices to foster meaningful

engagement with cultural differences and support students in developing intercultural competence.

2. It is recommended that institutional administrators develop and implement strategic policies to strengthen and expand study abroad opportunities in Thailand, particularly for students from Southeast and East Asia. Such initiatives can play a vital role in enhancing students' intercultural awareness and global engagement.

#### **Recommendations for Future Research**

1. The findings of this study are limited by the sample size and characteristics; therefore, the results should not be generalized. Future research should aim to increase the sample size and include more heterogeneous population.

2. Further qualitative research is needed to gain an in-depth understanding of students' cultural transitions, as well as their processes of adjustment and adaptation to new environments.

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