

# **Exploring the Expansion of Chinese Students in Thailand: Situations and Motivations<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT—**: This research had the following objectives: 1) To explore the situation of Chinese students in Thailand; and 2) To study the motivations of Chinese students to study in Thailand. This research was a qualitative study. Data was collected through a document review, focus group discussions, and interviews. The study found that, in 2020, there were 14,423 Chinese students studying in higher education in Thailand. Most were from southern China, but students from other parts of China were also appearing in greater numbers. There are many reasons why Chinese students choose to study abroad. For example, there is the lack of opportunities to continue study in their country, to avoid social pressure, to benefit from better economic conditions, parental support to study abroad, support of the Chinese government to study abroad, etc. The most important reasons why Chinese students chose to study in Thailand include lower costs, variety of courses that meet the needs of Chinese students, good atmosphere and suitable environment for studying. Most Chinese students also preferred to concentrate in the majors of management, business administration, international trade, and Thai language. Other majors are also becoming more popular, such as communication arts, fine arts, and music, among many others. Overall, the COVID-19 situation did not seem to affect the growth in the number of Chinese students coming to Thailand.

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## **1. Introduction and Importance of the Topic**

Since China's reforms and opening up to the world, China's economy has grown rapidly. As a result, the lives of Chinese people have improved significantly in the past 50 years. Besides their concern with quality of life, Chinese parents also pay particular attention to promoting the education of their children, especially in single-child families. Thus, for those who can afford it, sending children to study abroad has become a common phenomenon among families in China's major cities. Accordingly, the rate of overseas study among Chinese students has been increasing steadily. According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, Chinese students are the most numerous among nationalities of students studying abroad around the world. (CRI 2020)

If considering the pre-COVID period, the number of Chinese students studying abroad in 2018 was 662,100. Most preferred to study in Europe or North America, while a minority continued their education in countries participating in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). That number was an increase of 15.7 percent over 2017, bringing the total of Chinese students in BRI countries to 66,000 (MGR Online 2018). In addition, in recent years, there has been an increasing trend of Chinese students going to study in ASEAN-member countries. The top three countries in ASEAN that are most popular destinations for Chinese students are Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand.

Indeed, the number of Chinese students in Thailand is increasing at astonishing speed. Only a decade ago, Chinese students in Thailand numbered in the hundreds. At present, however, the number has increased to tens of thousands, and is likely to increase further as China relaxes travel restrictions for its citizens. Thai education data for foreign students indicate that

the Chinese outnumber those of any other foreign nationality. Also, the most popular degree program among these students is the bachelor's degree, followed by master's and doctoral degrees, and across a wide variety of disciplines and faculties.

The increase in Chinese students in Thailand can be attributed to several reasons. Firstly, the post-secondary level education system in China is highly competitive, and a significant number of Chinese students who take the college entrance exam each year do not qualify for acceptance. Secondly, Thai universities are increasing their curricula for international students, and tuition is relatively inexpensive, especially compared to counterparts in North America and Europe. Thirdly, the environment of Thai society (especially in Bangkok) is, on the surface, quite compatible with that of urban China and, thus, it is possible for the Chinese student to acculturate rapidly. In addition, there is a good political and economic relationship between Thailand and China, and that probably facilitates the visa application and approval process. The researcher was interested in investigating the following: 1) The situation of Chinese students in Thailand, including the number, development, and various characteristics; and 2) The factors behind the choice of Thailand to continue their post-secondary education.

## **2. Methodology and limitations of the study**

### **2.1 Methodology**

This research is a qualitative study. Data was collected by document research, coupled with focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, which were conducted between July and October 2020. The three components of the data collection are as follows:

- Documentary research: This included a review of related research and other sources of secondary data, e.g., research papers, theses, academic articles, journals, news articles, datasets, and other print and electronic media.

- The focus group discussions covered concepts, behaviors, attitudes, and feelings toward studying in Thailand. The partici-

pants included 25 Chinese students in Thailand (18 currently enrolled, and seven who have graduated but stayed on in-country). The participants were limited to those from mainland China (i.e., excluding Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macao). The participants included those who were enrolled in full degree programs (i.e., excluding those in short-term study, language or vocational education programs). The method for selecting data providers involved the use of the snowball sampling technique, aiming to reach at least 25 Chinese students as the criterion. The author accessed data providers through recommendations passed on from one Chinese student to another.

· The in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the situation of Chinese students from the point of view of school administrators. There were a total of three key informants in this component: One administrator from a public institution, and two from private institutions. The educational institutions were purposively selected given their large number of Chinese students.

## **2.2 Limitations of the study**

This research was conducted to collect data during the period from July to October 2021, which was a time when COVID-19 was still spreading. Consequently, the author was unable to conduct fieldwork to survey the actual situation. Therefore, all research activities had to be carried out online instead. As a result, the outcomes may differ from data collected through conventional methods.

## **3. Conceptual Framework and hypothesis of the Research**

This research article uses the migration framework of Everette S. Lee to study the factors behind Chinese students' decision to study in Thailand. Lee explained that migration is a change in residence, either permanent or semi-permanent, with related elements in the place of origin, destination, and intervening obstacles (Siampakdee 2019). There are 'push' and 'pull' factors in both the place of origin and destination which influence the

decision to migrate.

The influx of Chinese students to Thailand is a form of semi-permanent migration if those Chinese students leave upon graduation, or it could turn into a more permanent migration if those Chinese students settle in Thailand and do not migrate to other countries or return to China. The push factors are the limited number of universities in China which the average student can be admitted to, the difficulty of passing the university entrance exam, domestic unrest, etc. The pull factors include the low tuition fees of universities in Thailand, the affordable cost of living there, the ease of acculturation, and demand for Chinese students to enroll. Intervening factors are obstacles that discourage migration, such as travel costs, cultural/language differences, and the difficulty of adapting, among other factors. Finally, there are personal factors, which vary according to each individual, such as life experience, social network, family economic status, etc. In the case of this research, the net effect of the push, pull, and intervening factors define the current dynamic of Chinese migration to study in Thailand.

#### **4. Related Literature**

China has experienced significant economic growth over the past few decades, leading to an improved standard of living and higher income levels for the Chinese population. However, during this period of development, a considerable number of Chinese people have chosen to emigrate from China to other countries for various reasons. This trend of continuous emigration remains prevalent. One notable aspect of this migration is the significant number of Chinese students traveling abroad for higher education. This phenomenon has caught the attention of policymakers, educational institutions, and the Chinese government itself. As a result, the economic status of the Chinese people has significantly improved, and the pursuit of overseas education has become a crucial source of income for destination countries' educational institutions. Policymakers and academics

are interested in studying the behavioral patterns of these Chinese students to better understand their motivations and driving forces behind their decision to travel abroad. It seems that these students' journey for higher education has become a significant economic factor for the destination countries.

The literature of interest focuses on the objectives and motivations behind Chinese students' decision to study abroad, both in various countries and in Thailand. It aims to find similar results by examining the behavioral patterns of Chinese students when choosing to pursue higher education abroad. The study takes into account multiple dimensions, such as the socio-cultural dimension, political dimension, educational dimension, and economic dimension of both the home country (China) and the destination country. All of these dimensions play a role in influencing the decisions of Chinese students before they decide to study abroad.

Lo et al. (2019) studied Chinese students who traveled to Japan for higher education and identified significant factors influencing their decision-making process. These factors include family-related factors, cultural aspects, future career opportunities, and personal development opportunities. Chinese students often rely on advice from family members, friends, or acquaintances as references to help them make their decisions. Additionally, they consider factors such as work opportunities under student visas and the cost of education and living expenses. The research sheds light on the complexities involved in Chinese students' decision-making processes when choosing to study abroad and highlights the importance of various influencing factors in their choices.

In contrast, Chao et al. (2017) highlighted that the significant factors influencing the decision-making of Chinese students traveling to the United States are the desire for a broader worldview through international education and the perception that the education system in the U.S. is superior to that of China. Both Chinese students and their parents believe that the Chinese education system emphasizes exam results more than the learning process. In contrast, the U.S. system offers opportunities for students with diverse strengths and talents. The issue of broadening horizons

and the higher quality of education in the U.S., as pointed out by Chao is consistent with various other research studies such as Li (2007) and Qiang (2017) who studied the motivations of Chinese students studying in Hong Kong's Special Administrative Region, Lu (2006) who researched motivations of Chinese students studying in Canada, Wu (2014) who examined motivations of Chinese students studying in the United Kingdom. Similarly, the motivations for Chinese students to study in Thailand do not differ significantly from the findings of research conducted in other countries. In Thailand, Chinese students are motivated to study by various factors, including economic, political, and social aspects.

Yang (2020) conducted a survey to explore the factors influencing the decision-making of Chinese students to study at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University. The survey involved 100 Chinese students currently enrolled. The study identified two main types of attracting factors for these Chinese students to study in Thailand. The first type is personal factors, including the desire for self-development, stability, progress, social interaction, and learning about foreign cultures. The second type is market-related factors, which include university management, personnel management, and teaching quality. These findings align with previous research studies such as Li and Thaima (2021), which discussed the motivations of Chinese students studying abroad, and the motivations of Chinese students studying in Thailand. The push factors that stimulate Chinese students to study abroad include internal situations in China, such as education-related issues and the relatively high stress and pressure in Chinese society. The highly competitive entrance exams for Chinese universities, where prestigious universities have limited places, also contribute to the decision to study abroad. Although the Chinese government has been trying to increase the number of domestic higher education institutions in recent years, it still may not meet the demands of Chinese students. Additionally, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has further motivated Chinese students to seek knowledge abroad and bring back new knowledge and technology to apply in their home country. On the other hand, the pull factors that attract Chinese students to study in Thailand include the country's

location, opportunities for entering the job market and business ventures, which are considered important motivations for Chinese students to choose Thailand as their study destination. (Li and Thaima 2021, 335)

## **5. Results of the Research**

### **5.1 Development of Chinese students in Thailand**

For Thailand, the arrival of Chinese students has been increasingly apparent in recent years, though the initial influx started nearly a half century ago. After China opened up in 1978, the Chinese government encouraged Chinese students to study abroad by relaxing their emigration policy. Chinese families who had enough money began to send their children to study abroad. Most chose to send their child to prestigious institutions in North America and Europe. Thus, in the beginning, the number of Chinese students coming to Thailand was still small. Chinese immigrants to Thailand at that time relied on a network of relatives to help them adjust, and the principal pull factor from Thailand was the opportunity to meet members of the family clan. (Ping 2020) This pattern continued until the year 2000 when China announced the policy of “going out” (i.e., stepping out into the world). This policy included financial support to Chinese investors who wanted to invest abroad. In 2001, a major development was China’s acceptance into the World Trade Organization (WTO), which vastly expanded China’s reach for exchange of goods and services around the world. This also had the effect of accelerating the movement of the Chinese diaspora which followed the trade routes. Ever since, the Chinese government has continued to encourage its citizens to study abroad in order to expand their knowledge in a wide variety of fields, and to connect with multi-national businesses. Thus, the profile of the Chinese emigrant became younger, heralding an era of “Chinese youth mobility” to seek educational and business opportunities abroad simultaneously. (Ping 2020) Thailand’s higher educational institutions were one of the beneficiaries of this outward move-

ment of Chinese students.

With its more open country policy combined with membership in the WTO, the Chinese economy began to grow rapidly, especially in the eastern and southeastern regions of China, which are the production and distribution centers of China. Simultaneously, China opened its country to Southeast Asia via Yunnan Province and Guangxi Autonomous Region to support the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area. Over the subsequent decades, Yunnan Province and Guangxi Autonomous Region have played an increasingly important role as China's gateway to ASEAN. In addition, the Chinese government has pursued a policy to build good relations between Yunnan Province, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam by promoting cooperation in various fields, including economic, social, and cultural spheres. To prepare its citizens, educational institutions in Yunnan began to teach the language of its Southeast Asian neighbors, climbing to as many as 56 Southeast Asian language programs, attended by 7,300 Chinese students. (Ping 2020) Now, China has hundreds of partnerships with universities in Southeast Asia. Interestingly, Thai is the most popular language among Southeast Asian tongues studied by aspiring Chinese students. Part of the reason may be Thailand's historical connection with Yunnan Province, and the trade routes via the Golden Triangle. The increased volume of trade and investment between Thailand and China plays a more prominent role than other countries of the sub-region. Therefore, the number of Chinese students in Thailand continues to increase. Most of these young Chinese are from Yunnan Province and Guangxi Autonomous Region. Traditionally, Chinese students preferred to study in the field of commerce, business administration, and Thai language. However, more recently, Chinese students in Thailand have more diverse interests. In fact, the hometowns of Chinese students have broadened beyond Yunnan Province or Guangxi Autonomous Region; more students are coming to Thailand from the northeast and southwest of China. Their academic pursuits have also broadened as more Chinese students are majoring in subjects as fine arts, hotel and hospitality management, communication arts, and music, among many others.

## **5.2 Number of Chinese students in Thailand**

Over the past 10 years, the number of Chinese students in Thailand has increased significantly. According to the data from the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation of Thailand (MHESI), Chinese students are largest group by country of all international students in Thailand. Over the past ten years, the number of Chinese students has grown over six-fold. In 2010, there were 2,315 Chinese students in Thai higher education institutions. By 2020, the number increased to 14,423, with Chinese students accounting for nearly half of the total number of international students in each year.

By geographic distribution, Chinese students are mostly concentrated in Bangkok and its vicinity, followed by the north, northeast, east, central and south regions in rank order. However, there are discrepancies between the MHESI data and the information obtained by the researcher through interviews with school administrators. It can be assumed that such discrepancies may arise from the fact that the information from MHESI has not been updated regularly, or that the figures may not include Chinese exchange students, students who come for short-term study, or students in non-degree programs. The MHESI data suggests that Chinese students in Thailand are mostly concentrated in Bangkok and the north region. The following considers the regional pull factors for Chinese students.

The north is popular with Chinese students due to its proximity to China. Travel from China to Thailand's north is becoming increasingly easy and affordable, either by air or land (via Laos). There is also good weather, a cool environment, and peaceful atmosphere in the north. The cost of living is not very high, and the local cuisine is world famous. There are attractive tourist attractions, and there are various communities of ethnic Chinese scattered around the cities and towns of this region. What is more, many educational institutions in north Thailand have partnerships with Chinese universities. Shenyang Talent Innovation Institute Federation and the Faculty of Architecture at Chiang Mai University signed an MOU for student exchange.

(Chiangmai University 2022) Chiang Rai Rajabhat University Signed MOUs with eight well-known universities in Yunnan Province to exchange students. (Thairath online 2017) University of Phayao signed an MOU with Tianjin Normal University on academic cooperation. (University of Phayao 2020)

The eastern region is popular with Chinese students because it is not far from Bangkok, and has direct access to the Gulf of Thailand. It is also surrounded by attractions that are perennial favorites of Chinese tourists.

Northeast Thailand has grown in popularity as the “Isaan” region is scheduled to play an increasingly important role as a gateway to ASEAN. There are plans for a high-speed rail connection linking China to Thailand via the northeast and points beyond in the ASEAN Zone. Although the northeast does not have environmental attractiveness and tourism resources like other regions, the Isaan culture is known for its laid-back style, safety, and warmth of its people. The cost of living is the lowest among regions. Thus, more Chinese students are considering this under-subscribed region, and there is growing cooperation between northeast academic institutions and universities in China.

The south region has outstanding environmental and tourism resources. There are also many overseas Chinese settlements in the cities and towns of southern provinces. However, the south is not very popular with Chinese students, partly because the region has only a few reputable higher education institutions. It is also the farthest from China among Thai regions, and is not easy to travel through. The culture and diet are very different from those of China. Also, the southernmost border provinces still have problems of separatist violence. These factors have discouraged more Chinese parents and their children from studying there.

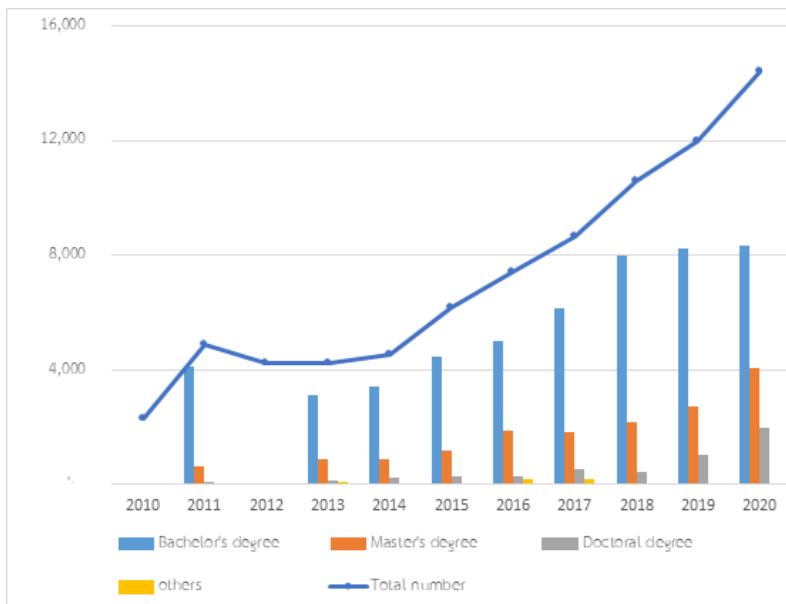
Bangkok and its vicinity are obviously the most popular destinations for Chinese students, given the fact that it is the cultural, economic, and educational center for the country, and offers a multitude of attractions unlike any other city in Thailand. There is increasing convenience getting around greater Bangkok

now that more of the Skytrain and subway lines are being completed. In addition, important parts of the central business district of Bangkok were originally settled by Chinese traders, who helped build Bangkok into the metropolis it is today. Most importantly, Bangkok has the widest selection of state and private colleges and universities, with many offering an international curriculum to meet the needs of all groups of students. Finally, there are career opportunities during and after graduation for foreign students.

### **5.3 Situation of Chinese students in Thailand after the COVID-19 era**

In 2019, just before the sudden emergence of COVID-19, there were nearly 12,000 Chinese students enrolled in post-secondary degree programs in Thailand, divided into 8,219 undergraduate students, 2,744 master's degree students, and 1,020 doctoral students. Later, in 2020, with borders closing around the world and societies hunkering down, the number of Chinese students in Thailand actually increased to 14,423, divided into 8,352 undergraduate students, 4,056 master's degree students, and 2,000 doctoral students. The increases were mostly in the master's and doctoral level candidates, while the number of bachelor's degree students were roughly constant. One important push-pull factor is that doing a master's degree in China takes more time than a comparable program in Thailand. Still, it is hard to explain the increase in the Chinese student body in Thailand at the height of the COVID pandemic, and during a time when vaccines were not yet available. It is possible that Chinese who were already living/working in Thailand decided to enroll in online degree programs with Thai universities in order to make good use of their time while stranded. (Note: Thailand closed its international borders to all non-essential travel, starting in March 2020.)

Figure 1: Number of Chinese students in Thai higher education institutions, academic year 2010-2020



Source: Collected from statistical data of the Higher Education Information Dissemination System, Higher Education Information Center.

Note: For the 2010 and 2012 academic years, discriminatory data on the number of Chinese students is not shown in the database; only the total number of students is available.

#### 5.4 Specific characteristics of Chinese students in Thailand

##### (1) Residence

As noted above, most Chinese students in Thailand come from southern China, especially Yunnan province and Guangxi Autonomous Region. Part of the reason is probably geographic affinity because Yunnan Province and Guangxi Autonomous

Region share a border with ASEAN. In addition, Yunnan is the closest Chinese Province to Thailand, and there are historical links between the Tai tribe (or Dai tribe) in Yunnan and the original settlers of northern Thailand. The distance from the Yunnan border to Chiang Rai (Thailand's northernmost province) is only 247 kilometers, which makes that part of Thailand seem almost like an extension of Yunnan. Indeed, the two cultures have traded and inter-married for generations. In some areas of Yunnan, such as Xishuangbanna, there is widespread teaching in/of the Thai language. While Guangxi Autonomous Region is positioned as the 'gateway to ASEAN' because it has the potential to be a land, sea, and air transit hub between China and Southeast Asia. Although the Guangxi Autonomous Region does not share a land border with Thailand, there is cultural affinity between Thailand and Guangxi. There is the Zhuang ethnic minority in that region of China whose language is similar to Thai, and the national Thai language is popular and widely taught in Guangxi, as in Yunnan.

However, in recent years, Chinese students in Thailand who hail from other provinces such as Jiangsu, Guizhou, Jiangxi, Henan, Sichuan, etc., have started to increase. That said, Chinese students from mega-cities like Shanghai and Beijing are still few and far between in Thai universities and colleges, perhaps because students who can afford to go abroad from those cities come from wealthier families and have better options. By contrast, the family background of most Chinese students in Thailand is predominately middle class.

## **(2) Personality and behavior of Chinese students in Thailand**

From the document review, focus group discussions with Chinese students in Thailand, and in-depth interviews with representatives of institutions accepting Chinese students, it can be generalized that Chinese students in Thailand share some unique attributes and behaviors that distinguish them from Thai students and students of other nationalities. The following are some examples:

1) *Assertiveness*: Most Chinese students in Thailand are assertive. In the classroom, Chinese students are confident in making presentations in front of their peers and instructors. They are not shy about expressing contrary opinions or offering critiques, and that is quite different from mainstream Thai students who are conditioned to remain fairly taciturn in front of their teacher, and generally will only speak up when prompted or prodded to do so.

*“In an academic context, the presentations between Thai and Chinese students differ significantly. Thai students tend to present their work in a casual manner with not much enthusiasm, while Chinese students are more articulate, confident in their speech, have better research, and deliver more impressive presentations.”*

(Interview, a private education institution administrator, October 2021)

2) *Diligence, earnestness*: China's social system and education hierarchy is highly competitive, and that creates considerable academic pressure on Chinese students to excel and produce more than the minimum. Therefore, some Chinese students who come to study in Thailand are seen as harder-working than their Thai classmates, who may take a more casual attitude toward studies and achieving an academic degree. One indicator of how driven Chinese students are is the speed with which they become conversant and literate in Thai, even after only 1-2 years in-country. This diligence may be more than the result of academic training. Indeed, Chinese immigrants around the world are noteworthy for their industriousness in all aspects of daily life, and rarely letting idle moments go to waste.

*“Chinese students are more diligent and proactive. If there's any topic they don't understand in class, they will keep asking until they grasp it.”*

(Interview, a state education institution administrator, September 2021)

3) *Having a commercial mind*: While there is no scientific proof, it has long been observed that ethnic Chinese have a gift

for commerce. Indeed, around the world Chinese are known for opening shops and engaging in trade as their first activities when achieving a certain level of financial stability in the destination country. That ability in commerce seems to be innate. For example, soon after arriving in Thailand and getting settled, Chinese start looking for ways to earn pocket money or extra income. Some might operate a small business, like online sales and accepting pre-orders for Thai products, which they send back to be sold in China. Others might work as a part-time tutor teaching Chinese language to local residents. Some who have developed Thai or English language fluency will be able to obtain lucrative freelance work as an interpreter or a recruiter to reach out to students who wish to study in Thailand. After graduation, Chinese students can parlay their natural mercantile ability to launch an enterprise or full-time business. Alternatively, with family financing, they might acquire Thai businesses, and grow their interests where they find a market niche. Indeed, some Chinese may have seen studying in Thailand as a stepping stone to business opportunities in Thailand. Thai Immigration has a number of pathways to long-term visas, residency permits, and incentives to enterprise foreigners with funds to invest. A focus group participant was a Chinese student in Khon Kaen Province in the northeast who said that she used her spare time from her degree program to sell products online. She has posted various brands of cosmetics, latex pillows, inhalers, etc. on the Wechat Moment platform. Her customers are friends and acquaintances back in China. The earnings from sales allow her to support tuition costs and daily living expenses without bothering her parents or taking out student loans.

*4) Adaptability:* Chinese students in Thailand are quite resourceful in integrating with the local Thai community they find themselves in. Of course, during the initial months, there will be some awkward moments and stumbles until they become more familiar with cultural norms, language, and other aspects of daily interaction. The Chinese students approach this challenge with diligence, just as in their study habits and business-mindedness.

*“Initially, Chinese students need to adjust to the new environ-*

*ment, new friends, and a new way of life. The university needs to support them and encourage them to be themselves, experience local food, and learn about local customs and traditions. Once they get used to it, they start to interact more with Thais. Some Chinese students become very close friends with Thai students and even invite Thai friends to visit their hometown in China.”*

(Interview, a state education institution administrator, September 2021)

*5) Like to gather in groups:* Although Chinese students in Thailand have shown that they can adapt well to Thai society, many Chinese students prefer to congregate with their peers. Indeed, only a small percentage of the Chinese students become intimate with Thai classmates or acquaintances. This is partly because these Chinese students still adhere to the concept of “Guanxi culture”, which holds that kinship relationships take precedence since those types of relationships can be a source of mutual assistance in the future. Therefore, Chinese students can become somewhat of a clique in the Thai university setting whenever there is a large enough group of peers to engage with on a daily basis. Especially, during important festivals, such as Chinese New Year, the Chinese students will give priority to joining their compatriots in group merit-making and ancestor worship.

## 5.5 Motivation to study in Thailand

The number of Chinese students in Thailand has grown considerably in recent years. The decision to study in Thailand of Chinese students is influenced by both push factors in the country of origin and the pull factors in the destination country, as discussed next.

### 5.5.1 Push factors to leave China

**(1) Inequality and pressure from social and academic conditions in China:** Today, Chinese society can be very stressful, especially in terms of education. Although all Chinese citizens are guaranteed nine years of free (compulsory) education, children from affluent families have more options, and a quality education

reflects well on the parents (Gold 2011). For this reason, Chinese people are pressured from a young age to excel in school and be competitive across all sectors. Most parents want their child(ren) to have a good life, and they will sacrifice a great deal for their child to get ahead in life. Indeed, this pressure starts not long after they learn to walk and talk. There are pre-school classes, after hours tutoring, exam preparation, and other mechanisms to get a head start, which begin even at the primary grade levels. Perhaps the most competitive and stressful event in an aspiring Chinese student's young life is the national university entrance exam. Even if they pass the exam and graduate from one of the coveted universities, they still have to compete with peers for the plum jobs and lucrative career opportunities. Those who do not meet the passing threshold in the university entrance exam are relegated to, perhaps, vocational education and a more labor-intensive occupation. While the cost of living in China has continued to rise generally, such inequalities and pressures are the key factors driving young Chinese people to seek a better life. An increasingly attractive option is to study abroad, especially in Thailand, a country where the cost of living is not that high, the people are friendly, and the universities are of international standard quality.

**(2) Failure to pass the university entrance exam:** As noted above, the nationwide Chinese university entrance examination, commonly known as the “Gaokao”, is a critical hurdle for the Chinese student who aspires to achieve higher education. At the time of this study, China had a total of 2,740 institutions of higher learning (University Students Essential Network 2020). However, as in most countries, the quality and competitiveness of the different institutions can vary widely, and getting into the right university can be almost a pre-requisite to pursuing one's desired career path. The Gaokao Exam is, therefore, the most important gateway in the Chinese education system that not only measures academic ability, but also can determine one's destiny. Passing the exam is almost a guaranteed ticket to success in Chinese society. It is an opportunity to move up to a higher social status and to lead a better life. Perhaps even more so in China than other countries, the revolution, reforms, and other upheavals of the past century

have made education one of the ways to achieve some stability and honor in life. Also, due to the one-child policy, the majority of families in middle-class China have only one child. This places even more importance on the educational success of the child, not just for the child, but also for the reputation and future assistance a successful child can provide for parents and grandparents. Indeed, the parents may plan the future of their only child many years in advance, and this usually translates into exceptional pressure to excel in school and pass the Gaokao Exam.

From 2012 to 2018, the number of students who sat for the Gaokao Exam was about nine million per year. That number is actually increasing, and 2019 was the first year that the number of students who registered for the exam exceeded ten million. In 2020, 10.71 million students sat for the exam, and in 2021, 10.78 million students took the exam. (Jia Jia 2021)

The data show that, in recent years, about 80 percent of Chinese students pass the Gaokao exam and, in 2019, 8.2 million passed out of the total of about 10.31 million who sat for the exam . (Jia Jia 2019) Still, that leaves several million Chinese high school graduates who have to look elsewhere if they want to continue their formal education. One increasingly attractive option (for families who can afford it) is to seek post-secondary education abroad. At the very least, attaining a university degree in another country would broaden one's horizons and be an opportunity to learn about different cultures. More importantly, any university degree from a foreign country will appear more respectable than settling for a vocational education, or going to work in a blue-collar job right after high school.

*“When I was in high school, I didn’t study well. Thus, my mother asked me to study Thai language. To learn the Thai language, it’s better to study in Thailand. For me, taking the entrance examination to a famous university in China would be impossible. I chose to study Thai because my English is poor. I chose to come to Thailand because it is close to China. As*

*for other countries like Malaysia or Singapore, they have to study in English, Therefore, I don't want to go there."*

(Focus group, July 2021)

**(3) The increased wealth of the middle class in China makes study abroad feasible:** At the time of this study, China had the world's second largest economy (Chinese government website n.d.). With the growth of the Chinese economy, many Chinese families have emerged from relative poverty to join the middle class, and have considerable disposable income. At least numerically, it can be said that China has the highest number of middle-class citizens of any country in the world. Moreover, the emerging middle class in China has high consumption and material needs in almost every aspect (Attakaweesunthorn 2020).

According to the 7th National Census in November 2020, China had a total population of 1.411 billion persons (Nation Bureau of Statistics 2021). In that year, the median annual income of all Chinese was 32,189 yuan; 43,834 yuan for urban and 17,131 yuan for rural residents. The middle class in China had an annual income ranging from 70,000-200,000 yuan a year, which reflects the growing prosperity of the population in the first two decades of the new millennium (Aec10news 2019).

The middle class in almost every country around the world has similar aspirations, and they have an understanding of the difficulties of life's struggle for well-being. Most members of the middle class are confident that higher education will create more opportunities in life. Indeed, a college education is seen as a stepping stone to wealth, power, and prestige. It is no wonder then that so many middle-class families will make major sacrifices to give their child(ren) an opportunity to study to the highest level possible (Chiang Mai News 2018). It is noteworthy that most Chinese students in Thailand come from middle-class families. Thus, even though those families may not easily afford it, they will gladly sacrifice to send their child abroad for a college education if they do not pass the Gaokao Exam. Indeed, the Chinese Confucian heritage attached great importance to education as a

good in its own right, and Chinese parents are willing to invest more in higher education for their children than most other countries around the world (CRI 2018). Some parents are willing to pay more than 100,000 yuan (about \$16,000) a year just for individual tutoring for the various entrance exams at leading schools in China (Royal Thai Army 2018). In recent years, more and more middle-class Chinese have sent their children to study abroad, especially in Thailand, which has affordable tuitions and cost of living.

The data above is consistent with the focus group discussion. Chinese students have diverse backgrounds; some come from well-off families, while others come from humble backgrounds. Most of them are from middle-class families.

*“There are some who come from rich families, and a lot of them study in Bangkok. But the majority of Chinese students are from middle-class families. Just a few students are in poverty.”*

(Focus group, July 2021)

**(4) Parental encouragement:** As noted, China had a strict population control policy, allowing only one child per family for many decades in the late 20th century and early 21st century. This policy was so successful that it changed the age-sex population structure of the country, and China now has negative population growth. China ended the one-child policy in 2018, and has been trying to persuade couples to have more children. However, the new generation of Chinese are not eager to have children, and are marrying at an older age. It is also possible that the younger generation of Chinese resent the pressure that was imposed on them to succeed as youth, and do not want to repeat that experience with a child of their own. This is resulting in an emerging labor shortage, especially in the younger cohorts of the working-age population. Due to delayed marriage and lack of interest in childbearing, the new cohort of high school graduates is receiving an extra level of parental encouragement to at least gain an advanced degree so that, if they do decide to marry and have children one day, they will be in a better socio-economic

position to do so. Studying abroad is one way to advance their career and honor their parents.

Regarding the Chinese students abroad, most parents probably felt comfortable supporting their child to seek post-secondary education in Thailand since it has a familiar culture, it is relatively safe, it is not too far from China, and it is more affordable than the more advanced economies in the region (e.g., Japan, Korea, Singapore). Also, Thai universities with international degree programs are probably more tolerant of those with limited English-language skills than institutions in North America or Europe. Ultimately, a degree from abroad is preferable to a degree from a lower-tier college in China.

**(5) Support from the Chinese government:** President Xi Jinping supports China's policy to build the quality of the new generation of working-age citizens, and the government clearly hopes that Chinese students who study abroad will bring their knowledge back to help boost country's development. There is also the concept that sending Chinese students out into the world is a form of exporting 'soft power,' and a way of expanding the new generation of overseas Chinese networks. These educated and sophisticated Chinese have the potential to expand Chinese influence globally, and in a more culturally-acceptable way. Accordingly, this group of Chinese students who go to study abroad are classified as China's "people-to-people ambassadors" (Bislev 2017, 82).

In addition, at the 22nd China International Education Conference held on October 21st-24th , 2021, in Beijing, Huai Jinpeng, the minister of China's Ministry of Education, asserted the following:

*"China recognizes that education must keep pace with the rapidly-advancing global economies and societies. Thus, international cooperation must be strengthened in many ways, but especially through the Belt and Road Initiative in education, support for studying abroad, improving the quality of higher education in China, improving services and policies for overseas Chinese students, and enhancing*

*educational resources.”*

(Foreign Daily, 2021)

That message reflects China's approach and clarity in openness to education and support for overseas study, which China is trying to facilitate in various ways. For example, the government monitors the relevant information, compiles statistics, provides assistance in job placement after graduation, etc. In addition to the above. In the Q&A Item#5337 at the 13th National People's Congress" (Ministry of Education of the PRC 2020) China's Ministry of Education announced the principle of "Support study abroad -- promote the return to China to come and go freely for maximum benefit." China also keeps track of people who go to study abroad, and tries to help their transition into the workplace through the "Blue book on finding employment for foreign graduates". (UFEIC, 2016)

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic and international travel restrictions, China's Ministry of Education still adheres to the human resource development guidelines by encouraging Chinese students to study abroad, as strongly as before. China's Ministry of Education views that the COVID-19 pandemic is a temporary crisis, and the Ministry is increasing cooperation channels in educational resources and expanding opportunities for study abroad of its citizens. (Ministry of Education of the PRC 2020)

### **5.5.2 Pull factors to study in Thailand**

The previous discussion hinted at some of the features which make Thailand an attractive destination for higher education by Chinese students and their families. The following considers these "pull factors" in greater depth.

**(1) Affordable tuition and living expenses:** Aside from the international travel cost, studying in Thailand probably costs no more than studying in China, and is certainly cheaper than studying in Western countries. If Chinese students have to travel to study in other cities or provinces, there will be many expenses such as travel, accommodation, personal expenses, etc.,

which may be similar to studying abroad in some countries. If Chinese students go to study in Europe or North America, the cost could easily exceed 300,000 yuan per year (about 1.5 million baht). Even if the destination is Singapore, the average cost for the Chinese student would be at least 50,000 yuan or more per year (about 250,000 baht), which could be prohibitive for the average middle-class Chinese family. By contrast, a Chinese student in Thailand would incur expenses of 30,000 to 50,000 yuan a year (about 150,000 to 250,000 baht), and this amount is more affordable for the average Chinese family. What is more, the Chinese probably consider the cost-effectiveness of different higher education options, and Thailand must be near the top of the list. In addition, obtaining an education visa in Thailand is not complicated and the requirements are not as onerous as in Western countries.

*“Tuition fees are a significant factor in the decision-making process. Studying in Thailand is more affordable. It costs around 500,000 Baht for the whole course, considering all expenses like food, accommodation, etc.”*

(Interview, a state education institution administrator, September 2021)

*“In Thailand, tuition fees and cost of living are not too expensive, and it is easier for my parents to support my education here.”*

(Focus group, July 2021)

(2) Attractive course options: The growing interest of Chinese students to continue their higher education in Thailand has resulted in many educational institutions, both public and private, adding to their international curriculum offerings and opening up new curricula tailored to the interests of Chinese students. Thus, today more than ever before, there is a wide variety and number of courses and fields of study for Chinese students to choose from. There are curricula in English, Thai, and even Chinese. While the admission criteria are not onerous to begin with, many educational institutions, especially in the private sector, do not even require a

language proficiency test as part of its acceptance criteria. In this sense, acceptance to many Thai institutions of higher learning is nearly guaranteed for Chinese applicants.

*“I chose to study here because of the major I want to study, which is teaching Thai as a foreign language. It is a program specifically designed for international students. I want to teach Thai to Chinese people, so I chose to study here.”*

(Focus group, July 2021)

(3) Appropriate location: The fact that Thailand is not so far from China is an advantage and a pull factor because travel expenses are not high, the student can travel back home often, and parents can easily visit their child in Thailand, combining the trip with some tourism as well.

*“Comparatively, the geographical location of Yunnan Province is much closer to Thailand. The time and cost of travel are acceptable and more convenient.”*

(Focus group, July 2021)

**(4) Good Thai-Sino relations:** From the past to the present, Thailand and China have enjoyed a long and friendly relationship. Thailand has never had any state-level feuds or grievances with China. For centuries, Thai-Sino relations have been mutually supportive. In fact, the Chinese have a saying “China and Thailand are one family”. This bi-lateral amity extends over the economic, political, government, education, society, and technology spheres. There are countless ties in commerce between Chinese and Thai entrepreneurs, and the extent of intermarriage between ethnic Thai and Chinese immigrants makes it hard to distinguish between them at times. This makes it that much easier for Chinese students to see that studying in Thailand will increase job opportunities and business connections after graduation. This is especially true if the student aspires to work in an international organization or multinational business that requires bi-lingual Thai-Chinese skill and cross-cultural adeptness. Ever since China’s opening up in the latter part of the 20th century, many Chinese businesses have

invested in Thailand (and vice versa), and they need personnel who can speak Chinese and Thai well. These bi-lateral opportunities will only increase over the coming years and decades (Wealth Me Up, 2020).

*“Moreover, if the COVID-19 pandemic ends and the high-speed railway project is completed, it will create more economic opportunities for China-ASEAN cooperation. I think if Chinese students understand Thai language and Thai people’s ideas, they will benefit a lot.”*

(Focus group, July 2021)

**(5) Conducive atmosphere and environment to study:**  
In addition to the affordable cost of living, Thailand is still a country with a good image in the eyes of the Chinese. It is safe from terrorist threats, there is hardly any anti-Sino racism, and there is openness to ideas and gender diversity. In addition, there is a better medical care system in Thailand compared to China.

### 5.5.3 Other factors influencing the decision

(1) Individual factors: Many Chinese students decide to study in Thailand because they are impressed by certain attributes, such as the following:

- Impressive attractions: Many Chinese students may have traveled to Thailand at a younger age and were impressed by the tourist attractions, food, culture, hand-made products, or the Thai people’s serene and gentle way of life. Therefore, when they finish high school or some college education in China, it is logical that they might seek to continue their higher education in Thailand. That way, they can advance their career potential while enjoying the sights and sounds of Thailand as any tourist might.

*“I’ve visited many places in Thailand, including Chiang Mai, Phuket, Bangkok, and Pattaya. I like Thailand a lot; the food is delicious, and Thai people smile and are friendly even to strangers. It’s a new experience for me. So, I chose to study here. My parents also support my decision because they also like Thailand.”*

(Focus group, July 2021)

- Impressed with the socio-cultural conditions: Some Chinese students are impressed with the easy pace of life Thai society compared to urban China. There is low stress, even in a mega-city like Bangkok, and people are very gracious to each other, even if they are strangers or a different nationality. This makes Chinese students feel welcome and appreciated, so it is natural that they would try living in Thailand while pursuing their higher education.

*“During my fourth year of study, I came to Thailand and traveled to various provinces, including Chiang Mai and Koh Samet. I felt that Thai people are friendly, and comfortable to be around. It was an experience that I couldn’t find in China. So, I decided to pursue my 2nd bachelor’s degree in Thailand. My parents supported my decision, reasoning that even if I’m unsure of my future plans, continuing my studies is a good choice.”*

(Focus group, July 2021)

- Impressive actors, singers, movies or Thai dramas: The Thai entertainment industry is quite popular in China, especially in the southern part of China. Some Chinese students choose to study in Thailand because they are fascinated by Thai celebrities, pop singers, and film actors/actresses. This is another pull factor of Thailand, in that the Chinese students want to follow the performances of their favorite Thai stars more closely.

*“I came to study in Thailand because I like Thai actors, especially Prachaya (Singto). I came to study here and follow my stars.”*

(Focus group, July 2021)

- (2) Confidence in adapting to life in Thailand: The Chinese have a favorable image of Thailand, even if they have never been there before. They trust in hearing about the experience of their friends and relatives who have been to Thailand, and they have also thoroughly researched life and studying in Thailand on social media and various Internet resources. Chinese social media is replete with first-hand stories by Chinese students in Thailand.

In recent years, video clips with vignettes about Thailand have become very popular and influential. There are clips about travel, food recommendations, university tours, and daily life of Chinese people in Thailand, among countless other topics.

Another pull of Thailand, and especially Bangkok, is the cosmopolitan nature of the country in which no ethnicity should feel unwelcome. Ever since the founding of Siam, the country has been known as a cultural crossroads where traders and migrants from all parts of the world can come to visit, stay for a while, or even settle down and become part of the Thai community (Mahathanobol 2019).

(3) Services of agents: Brokers or agents play an important role in bringing Chinese students to Thailand. Many of the Chinese who are studying in Thailand (or other countries around the world) have arranged their application, travel, and visas through a specialized agency which can provide clear information and cut through any red tape. This helps facilitate the process and saves the applicant considerable time, though at some cost. The recruiters who serve as a bridge to higher education in Thailand range from private brokers to representatives of Thai and Chinese educational institutions themselves. For example, Chinese students can apply to Thai colleges and universities through Chinese universities. The university will process the necessary documentation through a direct connection with their counterparts in Thailand. This broker system is another important factor that facilitates and encourages Chinese students to study in Thailand.

## **6. Discussion and Recommendations**

From the statistical data, it is evident that the number of Chinese students in Thailand has been consistently increasing, especially in the years before the COVID-19 pandemic. Chinese students in Thailand mainly come from southern China, such as Yunnan and Guangxi, and they are inclined to study fields related to international trade, cross-border business, and the Thai language. The key motivating factors for their decision to study in Thailand include career opportunities and China's active foreign

policy, particularly in strengthening relationships with various countries, making ASEAN more prominent, and elevating Thailand's role in the region. This has led to increased Thai-Chinese cooperation in various dimensions, including education, economy, and socio-cultural aspects. The interest of Chinese students to study in Thailand has continued to grow, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it did not negatively impact the number of Chinese students going to study there. Currently, Chinese students come from various regions of China to study in Thailand, and they opt for a diverse range of academic disciplines. This includes business administration, Thai language, international trade, hotel management, music and performance arts, communication arts, among others. Educational institutions have adapted to this trend by introducing new courses or expanding their curriculum to accommodate these Chinese students.

Regarding the study's findings on the motivations of Chinese students to study in Thailand, the findings align with Everette S. Lee's concept of migration theory, which explains migration as a result of push factors, pull factors, and intervening factors, as summarized below:

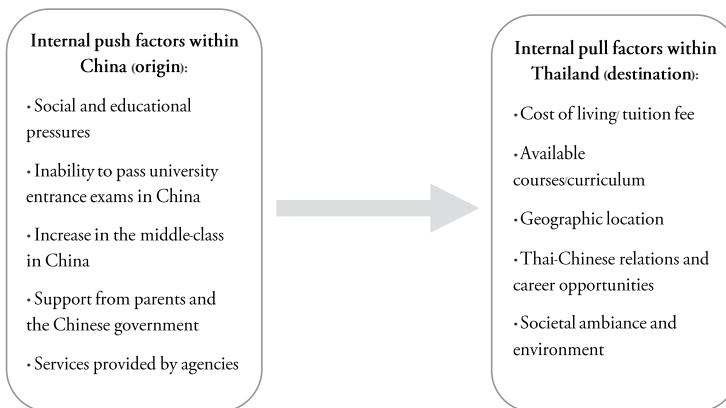
1. Push factors are the drivers in the home country that compels or motivates Chinese students to seek education abroad. They can be divided into social factors, such as pressure within China's education system and intense competition in Chinese society, leading Chinese students to experience stress and seek relief by studying abroad. Economic factors also play a role, especially with the growth of the Chinese economy, particularly before the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased the middle-class population in China. Consequently, middle-class parents have the idea of promoting their children to study abroad for better opportunities. Personal factors include the inability to pass the entrance exams for top Chinese universities.

2. Pull factors are the magnets in the destination country that attract or motivate Chinese students to choose to study in Thailand. They can be divided into social factors, such as a peaceful learning and living environment that is favorable for Chinese

students. Economic factors include the reasonable costs of studying and living in Thailand, which are within the reach of the middle-class in China. Political and stability factors, particularly in the dimension of Thailand-China relations, are positive and exhibit cooperation in various aspects. This offers the prospect of career opportunities in the future. Geographical factors are the proximity of Thailand to China, making travel convenient, and expenses reasonable. The variety of educational opportunities, both in terms of curriculum and language of instruction, is also an important pull factor. Personal factors include the positive perception of Thailand by Chinese students.

However, the obstructing factors, which are negative forces that have an impact on studying in Thailand, have not been clearly evident in this study.

Figure 2: Conceptual framework of the study and results



The results of the study on the number and motivating factors of Chinese students in Thailand reflect that Thailand is a significant choice for Chinese students seeking further education. The expansion of Chinese students in Thailand continues to exhibit similar patterns and motivating factors as in the past. The most notable change is the increasing number of Chinese students

and their interest in diverse academic programs. This represents a crucial opportunity for Thailand to enhance and expand its role in international education. The study also reveals that Thailand possesses strengths in education that align with the demands of the Chinese student market and surpasses many other countries in the region.

Therefore, Thailand should promote the influx of Chinese students, as well as students from other countries, to elevate itself as an education hub in the region. Relevant organizations can achieve this through policies that promote international cooperation in education and by providing convenience for the entry of foreign students, such as from Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Bhutan and India, to create a balanced and diversified student population. To ensure stability and avoid over reliance on Chinese students, related Thai agencies should be cognizant of, and manage various factors affecting this influx, including educational institutions, educational agents, and businesses involved in the process. This will mitigate potential risks that could turn the expansion of Chinese students into a threat or excessive dependence. In doing so, the growth of Chinese students in Thailand will bring multifaceted benefits to the country.

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