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Cultivating Intercultural Competence in an Intra-Asian Exchange Program: The Perspectives of Thai Undergraduate Students in China

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Abstract. Intercultural competence (IC) is becoming increasingly important in higher education, especially regarding international student mobility within exchange programs. This study aimed to examine the IC reported by Thai undergraduate students after a two-month exchange program in China, investigate how Thai students perceived cultural similarities and differences in relation to their intercultural learning in the Thai Chinese context, and explore how the intra-Asian context of China shapes Thai students' intercultural learning. The study employed a parallel mixed-methods approach, collecting quantitative data from a 25-item self-assessment IC questionnaire (N= 129) and qualitative data from focus group discussions with 10 students. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Quantitative results showed that students reported relatively high levels of IC across all four dimensions, with cultural understanding having the highest average score and cultural adaptation the lowest. Qualitative results revealed four key areas: perceived cultural similarities and differences, cultural awareness and understanding, attitudes and acceptance of intercultural differences, and intercultural adaptation strategies. Perceived similarities may contribute to familiarity with the new environment, while differences in communication and daily life practices may cause students to re-examine their preconceived interpretations and expectations. This includes adapting communication methods and behaviors to the situation. The study results indicate that intercultural learning in the context of intra-Asian exchange programs can occur through interaction between familiarity and difference. This study expands understanding of IC beyond the context of movement between the West and Asia and highlights the importance of meaningful intercultural interaction and reflective experience in designing short-term exchange programs.

Keywords: intercultural competence; student exchange program; intra-Asian context; China; Thai undergraduate students

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1. Introduction

In the 21st-century educational landscape, escalating interconnections through student exchange programs has been positioned as a key strategy to enhance students' intercultural competence (IC), particularly in the context of higher education. Deardorff (2006) describes IC as a process involving attitudes, knowledge and understanding, and skills, as well as internal and external outcomes that facilitate communicating effectively and appropriately in intercultural interactions. Scholars, educators, and employers have determined IC as an essential graduate attribute that holds significant value in the workplace (Mai & Mai, 2021; Prouska et al., 2026). As also emphasized by the World Economic Forum Report: *The Future of Jobs*, IC is a crucial skill that enables individuals to communicate effectively, adapt to diverse work environments, and collaborate across cultural boundaries (World Economic Forum, 2025).

The increasing international mobility in higher education offers opportunities for undergraduate students to learn and interact interculturally with people from different cultural backgrounds. IC has been increasingly valued as a vital capacity in equipping students to communicate and interact more appropriately and effectively with individuals from various cultural backgrounds (Al-Afifi et al., 2026; Huynh et al., 2024; Sabet & Chapman, 2023). For undergraduate students, the opportunity to learn about and to encounter cultural differences is crucial in preparing them for their intercultural interactions in various contexts, including their studies, employability, and career paths.

The international exchange program is an important opportunity to achieve international mobility. It offers students a chance to immerse themselves in learning and interacting interculturally in the various contexts of different languages, cultures, and societies. Previous studies have shown that studying abroad and international exchange programs offer opportunities for students' learning and IC, particularly when exposing them to different perspectives and cultural adaptations, and communicating in various contexts (Nolan & Hickman, 2024; Yang et al., 2025).

However, not all students will develop their IC equally or to the same level simply by participating in the international exchange program or living in different cultural environments. Various factors contribute to this. As Yu et al. (2024) found, individual variables, including motivation, openness to differences, and willingness to communicate, as well as program conditions, may either help or hinder students' intercultural learning in short-term programs. Therefore, understanding the exchange program's outcomes should not only be considered through the lens of program participation but also through the nature of the intercultural experiences and the interactions that occur during participation in the program.

Within the intra-Asian educational context, there is a high level of mobility among undergraduate students, with a significant number of Chinese students currently enrolled in Thai universities (Siriphon & Banu, 2022). Numerous Thai students are also enrolled in Chinese universities (Lin & Kingminghae, 2018; Teng & Bui,

2020). This mobility is interesting and significant for studying IC, as intercultural learning occurs not only between societies that are perceived to have obvious cultural differences. In the Thai Chinese context, students may encounter familiarities and similarities; however, recent studies have revealed that Thai students still face differences and challenges in language, communication practices, and cultural and social adaptations (Cui et al., 2024; Wang & Xu, 2024). Such similarities and differences make the intra-Asian Thai Chinese context crucial in understanding how students perceive, interpret, and adapt to intercultural experiences.

Many previous studies have examined the relationship between participating in studies abroad or in international exchange programs on the one hand, and the intercultural learning and competence of undergraduate students on the other, with some studies focusing on the mobility between Western and Asian cultural contexts (Zhu et al., 2024). However, studies on student exchange programs within an intra-Asian context are increasingly focusing on Thai students' experiences in China, examining various aspects such as social and cultural adaptation, language skills, relationships with local people, identity, and cultural experiences (Cui et al., 2024; Kingminghae & Lin, 2023; Teng & Bui, 2020; Wang & Xu, 2024).

Nevertheless, most of the studies do not directly focus on IC as a multidimensional construct, while there is limited understanding of how Thai students in the short-term exchange programs perceive the development of their IC, especially when they encounter both cultural familiarity and difference in the Thai Chinese context. Hence, there is a need to examine both IC levels after participating in the program and, in parallel, to investigate how Thai students perceive and enhance their IC through their experiences during the program.

To address the research gaps mentioned, this study employed a mixed-methods approach firstly, to assess the post-program IC of their two-month exchange program at three universities in China. Secondly, this study aims to investigate how Thai students' learning experiences regarding cultural similarities and differences within the intra-Asian context of Thailand and China influence their development of IC. Finally, it explores how the intra-Asian context of China shapes Thai students' cultural awareness and understanding, attitudes, and cultural adaptation skills as key components of their IC enhancement.

This study adopted Deardorff's framework (2006) as a primary framework for understanding IC as a multidimensional competence, while Byram's model (1997) was used in providing a complementary lens to examine interpreting intercultural knowledge, attitudes, communication skills, and critical cultural awareness. Beyond the Thai Chinese context, this study may offer some insights that could be useful to other short-term student exchange programs, especially between countries that share some degree of cultural or regional proximity. The study contributes to a broader understanding of intercultural learning in exchange contexts in which cultural familiarity and difference may co-exist. The study formulated the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What is the level of IC among Thai undergraduate students following participation in a two-month exchange program in China?

RQ2: How do Thai undergraduate students perceive their experiences of cultural similarities and differences between Thai and Chinese cultures, which contributed to their intercultural learning and development?

RQ3: How does the intra-Asian Thai Chinese exchange context shape Thai undergraduate students' cultural perceptions, awareness, attitudes, and adaptation during their exchange program experiences?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Concepts and Theoretical Perspectives on Intercultural Competence

IC is generally defined as the ability to interact, engage, and communicate appropriately and effectively among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). Beyond its effectiveness in interaction, IC also involves recognizing cultural differences and then using attitudes, knowledge, and skills to understand and manage those differences (Lantz-Deaton & Golubeva, 2020). Therefore, IC should not be viewed as a single skill, but as a multidimensional ability involving perception, attitude, knowledge, skills, and intercultural interactions.

The process model of intercultural competence by Deardorff (2006) underlined IC as a dynamic and developmental process by starting with attitudes such as respect, openness, and curiosity, which relate to the development of knowledge and IC. These elements lead to internal outcomes such as adaptability, flexibility, and an ethnorelative perspective, resulting in external outcomes of effective and appropriate communication in various intercultural contexts. On the other hand, Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) developed in a context of foreign language teaching and learning, which offers five key elements, namely attitudes, knowledge, skills in interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. This framework helps describe the abilities individuals use to understand, interpret, and interact with people from different cultural backgrounds and contexts.

Although Deardorff (2006) and Byram (1997) focus on different aspects, these two frameworks conceptualize IC as a multidimensional construct involving attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Deardorff's model stresses the process that links these components to internal outcomes and appropriate and effective interactions, while Byram's framework provides more details about the elements of knowledge, attitudes, and skills for interpreting, relating, discovering, and intercultural interactions. Therefore, this study employed Deardorff's (2006) framework, which serves as the overall conceptual framework for understanding IC, while Byram's model (1997) is applied as a complementary framework to reflect the specific components of IC that are evident in students' assessments and experiences.

2.2 Cultural Dimensions and Intercultural Competence

Although Thailand and China are in the Asian region and may share some Asian cultural similarities, regional proximity does not mean that they are culturally identical in every aspect. Differences in interpretation and communication behaviors can still occur in the interactions between Thais and Chinese (Ma, 2024).

Hofstede's cultural dimension (Hofstede et al., 2010) can be used as a contextual framework to consider some cultural similarities and differences between these two societies; for example, regarding the individualism–collectivism dimension, both Thailand and China tend to prioritize group needs and relationships when comparing to those societies with a high degree of individualism (Hofstede et al., 2010). However, cultural similarity at the national level does not mean that individuals in both societies will share the same values, communication styles, or the same behaviors (Brewer & Venaik, 2014; Minkov et al., 2023). Therefore, many factors such as social relationships, hierarchy, harmony in interaction, and saving face should be considered as contextual conditions that may be relevant to interaction, rather than as fixed traits of individuals based on nationality.

Accordingly, in this study, the cultural dimension was not used to categorize or predict the behaviors of Thai and Chinese students, but rather as a contextual lens to assist in considering how Thai students perceive, interpret, and respond to cultural similarities and differences encountered during exchange experiences. This framing helps link cultural context with the study of IC and learning without assuming that members of the same national culture will have identical experiences or behaviors.

2.3 Student Exchange Programs and Intercultural Competence Development

Student exchange programs have been served as a crucial educational strategy to equip students with immersive experiences and international approaches, providing students the opportunity to enhance their IC (El-Asri & El Karfa, 2024; Thinh, 2024; Zuo & Hu, 2022). Direct interaction with different people and cultural environments can provide opportunities for students to review preconceived notions, learn different communication strategies, and adapt to intercultural situations. However, having the opportunity to experience other cultures through exchange programs does not mean that all participants will develop IC in the same way.

The study has previously shown the potential of exchange programs to support intercultural learning in many dimensions. As Zuo and Hu (2022) found, there is a correlation between attitudes towards intercultural communication and cultural knowledge, language ability, and participation in intercultural communication among Chinese students. Thinh (2024), however, reported on the enhancement of IC among Vietnamese students who participated in the short-term exchange programs in Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Findings on short-term programs also indicate that, despite their limited duration, they can create valuable opportunities for intercultural learning and interaction. The opportunities and outcomes of learning may vary depending on the nature of the program and the context of interaction (Humphreys & Baker, 2021). These

findings suggest that intercultural learning may depend not only on program duration but also on students' experiences and opportunities for intercultural interaction.

However, many studies have found that short-term exchange programs abroad are not very effective in enhancing IC for the participants. Goldstein (2022), who conducted a systematic review of 68 studies on short-term study abroad programs, found that improvement of IC was unclear and inconsistent across these studies. Similarly, Lemmons (2023) emphasized that short-term programs may fail to meet their objectives of increasing IC and may perpetuate stereotypes. In addition, Wang et al. (2021) found that the short-term programs abroad enhanced cultural knowledge but did not help in significantly improving cultural awareness, attitudes, or skills. Thus, the findings in these studies suggest that short-term programs abroad are not always effective in improving IC.

In short, previous studies suggest that the roles of student exchange programs can promote opportunities for intercultural learning, but the outcomes of IC can be varied depending on many factors, such as the program design and duration, the places or cities of the host culture in the environmental context of internationalization, and the level of cultural immersion (Paras et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2024). The key issue, therefore, is not merely whether exchange programs can promote IC, but rather what kind of intercultural experiences students have and how the conditions or contexts of those experiences relate to their intercultural learning. This is particularly relevant to short-term intra-Asian exchanges, where students may experience both cultural similarities and differences.

2.4 Cultural Proximity and Difference in Intra-Asian Student Mobility

Thai students participated in exchange programs at three universities in Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Hefei, each with different social, institutional, and intercultural contexts. These differences may shape students' intercultural learning experiences and opportunities. Research on intergroup interaction shows that interactions between members of different groups generally help reduce intergroup bias, while conducive conditions for interaction, such as equal status, shared goals, collaboration, and institutional support, can promote positive outcomes of such interactions (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Nevertheless, the findings on short-term study programs in China reveals that opportunities and outcomes for intercultural learning can vary depending on both individual factors and the nature of context and program (Iskhakova et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2024; Zhao & Liu, 2025).

Accordingly, to understand IC in the context of student exchange programs, one should consider not only the cultural differences between the home country and host country, but also the notion of whether the context in which students interact and experience during their participation aligns with criticisms of the concept of cultural distance. This argues that the relationship between cultural distance and outcomes of participation or adaptation should not be interpreted as a simple linear relationship (Shenkar, 2001).

Studies on IC in the context of international education often focus on cultural differences between the source and host countries. However, geographical proximity or being in the same region does not necessarily mean that students will have similar cultural experiences or encounter fewer cultural differences. The concept of cultural distance is therefore crucial in helping to explain the cultural differences between the home country and host country contexts at the societal level (Hofstede et al., 2010). Therefore, when studying cultural distance in the context of international mobility, one should also consider individual perceptions. Since students may interpret and respond to cultural similarities and differences in various ways, recent research has increasingly focused on perceived cultural distance as a factor related to the experiences and adaptation of international students (Tang et al., 2024).

In the Thai Chinese context, regional proximity in Asia does not eliminate the challenges of intercultural interaction and adaptation. The previous studies on Thai students studying in China revealed that their experiences were related to language, identity, social context, and interactions with people in the host cultures (Teng & Bui, 2020; Wang & Xu, 2024). Moreover, a study on Thai students in China may encounter challenges in language, culture, environment, and learning, while the social support from friends, family, and institutions plays a role in students' adaptation (Cui et al., 2024). These studies indicate that proximity within the Asian region does not eliminate the differences and challenges those students may encounter in the host country context.

A recent study has expanded its focus directly from language and adaptation to intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Namwat (2025) found a relationship between ICC and Thai undergraduate students' adaptation in China. While the study on short-term study programs in China further demonstrates that the outcomes of intercultural experiences can vary depending on both individual factors and program design (Yu et al., 2024), these findings indicate that understanding IC in the context of student mobility should not only factor in the country where students are studying, but also the nature of the experiences and interactions that occur during the program.

However, even though previous studies have examined language, identity, adaptation, and IC among Thai undergraduate students in China, there is still a limited understanding of how those students who took part in short-term exchange programs perceive and interpret the cultural similarities and differences between Thailand and China, as well as how these experiences contribute to their intercultural learning. Therefore, the filling of this gap is also crucial for understanding IC in the context of short-term intra-Asian student exchange programs, particularly between Thailand and China, where regional proximity may coexist with cultural differences that significantly impact student experience.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design; both quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same period, then the results were analyzed and integrated to gain comprehensive findings regarding the impact of experiential learning on students' IC development (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative approach aimed to provide a complete picture of students' IC development through a questionnaire designed as an intercultural self-assessment after participating in the program. On the other hand, qualitative data from a focus group interview were used to explore students' experiences, particularly their perceptions of cultural similarities and differences between Thailand and China, as well as how they perceived their experiences as contributing to their intercultural learning.

The findings from both sets of data were compared and integrated during the interpretation phase to consider areas of consistency and instances where qualitative data expanded or explained quantitative results. Such integration is supported in consideration of both the reported post-project IC levels and the students' intercultural experiences. However, the study was not intended to test the causal relationships or measure changes in IC before and after the project.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The population of this study consisted of the entire cohort of 190 Thai undergraduate students who participated in a two-month summer exchange program at three different universities in China between May and July 2025. Participation was in the Chinese Studies (CNS; $n = 49$) and International Business: China (IB; $n = 141$) programs. All 190 eligible students were invited to participate in the research via LINE groups of both programs on a voluntary basis. The minimum sample size of approximately 129 was calculated using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error ($e = .05$). Of those students who were invited, 129 responded to the questionnaire and were included in the quantitative analysis, representing a response rate of 67.9%.

During the exchange program, students were in their first to third year of study, while when data was collected, they were in their second to fourth year. Participants had a background in Chinese language and culture from their coursework. The 129 respondents comprised 112 women (86.8%), 15 men (11.6%), and two who identified themselves as gender-diverse participants (1.6%). Because participation in the survey was voluntary, the possibility of self-selection and nonresponse bias cannot be ruled out.

For qualitative studies, Thai students were voluntarily invited to participate in focus group discussions, and 10 students accepted the invitation. This group consisted of students participating in the program at the three host universities in Hefei, Chengdu, and Guangzhou. These students had different levels of prior international experience, including some who had studied abroad before as well as those who had not. These characteristics were not used as selection criteria;

they rather reflected the voluntary participation of the student group in the qualitative study.

3.3 Research Instrument

This study employed a self-assessment questionnaire on IC as a quantitative data collection tool. The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions that were adapted from Lantz-Deaton and Golubeva (2020), using Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence process model as a conceptual framework for understanding IC as a multidimensional structure. The original English items were adapted to the context of Thai undergraduate students participating in an exchange program in China and subsequently translated into Thai.

Both the English and Thai versions were reviewed by three experts with relevant expertise in intercultural communication, research methodology, the English language, and educational measurement. The experts also evaluated the relevance and clarity of the items and their alignment with the objectives of the study, including the appropriateness of the Thai translation for the target population. All 25 items had an item-objective congruence (IOC) value of 1.00. The questionnaire exhibited strong internal consistency in the present sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$).

For this study, the questionnaire consisted of twenty-five items assessed on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questions covered four dimensions of IC, which consisted of (a) cultural awareness, (b) cultural understanding, (c) intercultural attitudes, and (d) cultural adaptation skills, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Dimensions of the self-assessment questionnaire of intercultural competence

Dimension	Item No.	Key Focus of the Item
Cultural Awareness	1	Understanding culture
	14	Being aware of your own cultural identity
	15	Being aware of personal biases
	16	Being aware of one's own thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.
	24	Understanding of cultural differences between Thai and Chinese culture
Cultural Understanding	3	Appreciating of different cultural perspectives
	6	Being open to learning new perspectives
	7	Understanding of others' feelings and perspectives
	11	Engaging in opportunities to broaden cultural understanding
	17	Having fair consideration in dealing with situations involving cultural differences
	18	Considering diverse perspectives before making decisions
Intercultural Attitudes	2	Having respect for other cultures

Dimension	Item No.	Key Focus of the Item
	5	Being open to learning from people of different cultural backgrounds
	12	Avoiding judgements without adequate information
	13	Avoiding quick judgments about others' behavior
	19	Displaying cultural humility
	20	Promoting fairness and acceptance of cultural diversity
	21	Challenging disrespectful behavior toward differences
Cultural Adaptation Skills	4	Interacting with others in a respectful way
	8	Handling uncertain situations with flexibility
	9	Adjusting behavior to fit with cultural contexts
	10	Adjusting communication style to fit with the context
	22	Being able to communicate interculturally
	23	Being confident in communicating in Chinese
	25	Adapting to Chinese culture

The Thai version of the questionnaire was tested for content validity by three experts with expertise in intercultural communication, research methodology, and educational measurement and evaluation. The experts considered the appropriateness, relevance, and clarity of the Thai-language questions in relation to the study objectives and target audience.

For the qualitative component, a 12-question semi-structured focus group guide was used to explore students' perspectives and experiences related to IC and intercultural learning. The question covered four main areas: (a) students' perceptions of their IC and intercultural learning, (b) perceived cultural similarities and differences between Thailand and China, (c) attitudes toward Chinese culture and society, and (d) intercultural adaptation experiences and strategies. All questions were reviewed for content validity by the same three experts.

3.4 Data Collection

Data collection consisted of two parts: quantitative data collection through online questionnaires and qualitative data collection through focus group discussions. Prior to data collection, participants were reminded about the purposes of the study, and that participation was entirely voluntary. For the quantitative phase, the questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms and disseminated through LINE groups for students in both programs. Before participants clicked on the online questionnaire, they saw an electronic consent form. When participants selected "I agree," continuing the questionnaire meant they consented to

participate in the study. Participants could skip questions they did not wish to answer without any consequences. Data collection from the questionnaires took approximately two weeks; 129 participants responded, with the data being used for quantitative analysis.

For quantitative data collection, online questionnaires were conducted via Google Forms and disseminated through LINE groups for students in both programs. Prior to accessing the questionnaire, participants received information about their studies and an electronic consent form. Only those who selected "I agree" could proceed with answering the questionnaire. Participants could skip questions they did not wish to answer without any consequences. Data collection from the questionnaires took approximately two weeks; 129 participants responded, with the data being used for quantitative analysis.

For the qualitative phase, a focus group discussion was conducted via a Zoom platform with 10 participants; the participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without any consequences. The discussion was conducted in Thai to overcome language barriers and allow participants to fully express their experiences and perspectives. The focus group lasted about one hour and a half. The ethical approval for this study was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Prince of Songkla University.

3.5 Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately before the results from both parts were considered during the process of interpretation. For quantitative data, all 25 questions were scored using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and categorized into four dimensions: cultural awareness, cultural understanding, intercultural attitudes, and cultural adaptation skills. The overall IC score was calculated from the sum of the question scores, while the internal consistency of the questionnaire was checked using Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha = .94$).

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviation, median, interquartile range, frequencies, and percentages, were used for summarizing the characteristics of the sample. Differences in overall IC scores between groups were analyzed using independent samples t-tests for variables, with two groups and ANOVA for variables with more than two groups and considered statistically significant for a two-sided p-value < 0.05 . All statistical analyses were performed using R (R Core Team, 2024). Missing data at the item level was excluded from the relevant analysis.

Qualitative data from the focus group discussions were analyzed using thematic analysis following the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). Data analysis and coding were conducted, beginning with familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, identifying key themes, reviewing and refining themes, and finally defining and naming them. Codes and themes that emerged were also discussed together with research advisors in an effort to increase dependability and consistency in interpreting the data. In protecting participant identities, all 10

participants from the focus group discussion were assigned participant codes (P1 – P10) which were used for presenting quotations in the finding.

In the final step, the results of both quantitative and qualitative analyses were considered together during the interpretation phase by comparing the findings from both data sets to assess the consistency of the results and examine how qualitative data complement or explain the patterns found in the quantitative data.

4. Results and Findings

This section presents the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study, beginning with the participant characteristics and post-program scores of IC, and followed by qualitative findings on Thai students' intercultural learning experiences, intercultural attitudes, and adaptation during the two-month exchange program in China.

4.1 Participant Characteristics

Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of 129 participants, including gender, year of study, academic program, previous international experience, and exchange location. Most participants were female (86.8%), with 11.6% male and 1.6% identified as gender-diverse participants. Thai students were distributed across Years 2-4. Participants were enrolled in either the Chinese Studies (CNS) program (34.1%) or the International Business: China (IB) program (65.9%). Most participants (84.5%) reported having had some type of experience abroad. The locations where students joined the summer exchange program were Chengdu (37.2%), Guangzhou (34.9%), and Hefei (27.9%).

Table 2: Participant characteristics

Characteristics	Overall (N=129)
Gender	
Female	111 (86.8%)
LGBT	2 (1.6%)
Male	15 (11.6%)
Year of study	
2nd Year	38 (29.5%)
3rd Year	48 (37.2%)
4th Year	43 (33.3%)
Major	
CNS	44 (34.1%)
IB	85 (65.9%)
Previous overseas study experience	
Yes	109 (84.5%)

Table 2: Participant characteristics

Characteristics	Overall (N=129)
No	20 (15.5%)
Exchange city	
Chengdu	48 (37.2%)
Guangzhou	45 (34.9%)
Hefei	36 (27.9%)

4.2 Post-Program Intercultural Competence

Table 3 demonstrates descriptive statistics for participants' self-reported IC following the two-month exchange program (N = 129). The overall score was M = 109 (SD = 10.30), with a median of 109 and scores ranging from 75 to 125. These results indicate relatively high self-reported IC among the participants at the time of data collection. When considering the four dimensions, mean scores were relatively high. The dimension of cultural understanding had the highest mean score (M = 4.39, SD = 0.63), followed by cultural awareness (M = 4.36, SD = 0.65) and intercultural attitude (M = 4.35, SD = 0.71). While the dimension of cultural adaptation skills had the lowest mean score (M = 4.27, SD = 0.68), this dimension also showed a relatively high level of self-reported competence.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of intercultural competence scores

Measure	Mean (SD)	Median (Min, Max)
Total score	109 (10.30)	109 (75, 125)
Dimensions		
Cultural awareness	4.36 (0.65)	-
Cultural understanding	4.39 (0.63)	-
Intercultural attitude	4.35 (0.71)	-
Cultural adaptation skills	4.27 (0.68)	-

4.3 Intercultural Learning Experiences in China

This section presents the qualitative analysis and indicates how participants perceived cultural similarities and differences between Thailand and China, as well as how their experiences were associated with intercultural learning during the exchange program. The thematic analysis identified four main themes: (a) perceived cultural similarities and differences, (b) cultural awareness and understanding, (c) intercultural attitudes and openness, and (d) intercultural adaptation strategies, as shown in Table 4:

Table 4: Themes of students' intercultural competence and learning

Themes	Subthemes	Representative quotations
Perceived cultural similarities and differences	Familiarity through similar cultural values and practices	<i>Initially, I did not find it difficult to adjust because many aspects were similar to Thailand, such as respecting lecturers and appropriate behavior in the classroom and at the university. (P3)</i>
Cultural awareness and understanding	Self-reflection on different perspectives	<i>At the beginning, we thought of some practices of Chinese people, that they seem to ignore social manners, but as we stayed longer, we began to understand that these practices are common for them. (P8)</i> <i>Before coming to China, we thought that the Chinese would be idiosyncratic, but after staying longer, we realized that there are different kinds of people, and we should not generalize. (P1)</i>
Intercultural attitudes and openness	Openness to cultural differences	<i>We may not like something here in China, but we need to learn to accept it, because this is their way of life. (P4)</i>
Intercultural adaptation strategies	Different communication styles	<i>Some of my Chinese friends might have a different way of speaking by using a different tone of voice than I do. I might misunderstand things a little; I was thinking: "Is she angry with me?" (P1)</i> <i>At my first stage in China, I relied very much on language applications and friends, but later I did things more on my own. (P7)</i>

4.3.1 Theme 1: Perceived cultural similarities and differences

The findings showed that some Thai students perceived cultural similarities between Thailand and China, particularly regarding respect for lecturers and appropriate behaviors in a university setting. This perceived similarity made some Thai students feel more familiar with the new environment; they could understand some aspects of the Chinese social context. This led to their viewing the initial period of participating in the exchange program as being quite easily. As participant P3 explained,

"Initially, I did not find it difficult to adjust because many aspects were similar to Thailand, such as respecting lecturers and appropriate behaviour in the classroom and at the university." (P3)

This result reflects the idea that perceived cultural similarities among Thai students may have served as a basis for initial familiarity during the exchange program and supported them in adapting to certain aspects of the social and educational context in China more easily.

4.3.2 Theme 2: Cultural awareness and understanding

Although Thai students acknowledged cultural similarities between Thai and Chinese cultures, they also noticed cultural differences in the daily practices of Chinese people, such as communication styles, use of public space, concept of time and punctuality, as well as social etiquette. These differences tended to create

feelings of unfamiliarity at the beginning of their participation in the exchange program and required them to consider their interpretation of other people's behavior more carefully.

Many Thai students reported that their initial interpretations evolved when they had more intercultural experiences in the Chinese cultural setting. For example, P8 initially interpreted some behaviors in relation to social etiquette through their own cultural expectations but later came to understand them differently:

"At the beginning, we thought of some practices of Chinese people, that they seem to ignore social manners, but as we stayed longer, we began to understand that these practices are common for them." (P8)

This implies that the continuous experiences and interactions in daily life caused some Thai students to start reconsidering their initial judgments and to give more weight to the cultural context of behaviors. Instead of seeing unfamiliar practices only through their own cultural lens, they started to understand that the same behavior might have diverse meanings, depending upon the social and cultural context.

Thai students also thought about their preconceived ideas of Chinese people before joining the program. The direct encounter resulted in some students gaining a deeper understanding of the diversity of Chinese society rather than regarding them as a homogenous, culturally homogeneous group, as P1 explained:

"Before coming to China, we thought that the Chinese would be idiosyncratic, but after staying longer, we realized that there are different kinds of people, and we should not generalize." (P1)

From P1, this reflection illustrated a greater consciousness of individual and cultural differences within the host society and a knowledge of the limitations of cultural generalizations.

4.3.3 Theme 3: Intercultural attitudes and openness

Thai students reflected on their experiences in China, during which they encountered many cultural differences such as language, everyday practices and social norms. They admitted that they sometimes felt unaccustomed or uncomfortable during the program's initial stages. However, many participants described how, when faced with culturally varied settings, they tried to be open to and accept practices different from their own, rather than judging those actions entirely from their own cultural perspective. As P4 reflected:

"We may not like something here in China, but we need to learn to accept it, because this is their way of life." (P4)

Openness, as P4 indicated, does not imply agreeing or feeling comfortable with all cultural customs but recognizing that there are people who may have lives and practices different from one's own. This is a typical experience for students who are trying to reduce their tendency to judge based on their own cultural framework and to appreciate the contrasts they encountered while living in China.

4.3.4 Theme 4: Intercultural adaptation strategies

Thai undergraduate students described many misunderstandings that they experienced during the exchange program in China, particularly regarding communication. Differences in language use, tone of voice, and communication styles sometimes made it difficult for students to understand what others meant. For example, some students initially thought that their Chinese friends were angry because of the way they spoke. P1 described this experience as follows:

"Some of my Chinese friends may have a different way of speaking from me, using a different tone of voice. I may misunderstand a little. I think, 'Is she angry with me?'" (P1)

This example shows how different communication styles could lead to misunderstanding, especially when students interpreted an unfamiliar way of speaking based on that with which they were familiar. Over time, some participants described paying more attention to the situation and reconsidering their first interpretations when communicating with others.

Students also discussed different ways in which they managed unfamiliar situations in China. They observed how local people behaved, asked Chinese lecturers and friends for advice, used translation applications when they had difficulty with the language, and adjusted the way they communicated in various situations. P7 explained how this adjustment happened in everyday life:

"At the beginning of my stay in China, I relied heavily on translation applications and friends, but later I did more things by myself." (P7)

P7's experience confirms that adaptation took place through everyday situations rather than through one particular strategy. Students used the resources and support available to them when they faced difficulties, finding practical ways to manage unfamiliar situations. These experiences also indicate how students tried to adjust their communication and behavior while living in a different cultural environment.

Overall, when considering the quantitative results together, it was found that both aspects of the data helped clarify Thai students' IC after program participation. The quantitative results revealed that Thai students reported IC to be relatively high in four dimensions, with the dimension of cultural understanding receiving the highest scores, while the dimension of cultural adaptation received the lowest score. The qualitative results helped to identify more details of these experiences in which Thai students described reviewing preconceived notions, opening up to cultural differences, and trying to understand behaviors within different cultural contexts.

At the same time, they also encountered challenges in adapting, particularly misunderstandings in their communication with Chinese as well as their language limitations, which led to their using various strategies. Therefore, these qualitative findings complement the quantitative findings by demonstrating the experiences and challenges behind the IC levels reported by Thai students after participating in the program.

5. Discussion

5.1 Intercultural Competence and Learning Following a Short-Term Exchange Program

The results indicated that Thai students reported a high level of development in IC after participating in a two-month student exchange program during the summer semester in China. Quantitative data demonstrated high positive results in all four dimensions: cultural awareness, cultural understanding, intercultural attitude, and cultural adaptation. These results indicated that students had positive perceptions of their own intercultural abilities after participating in the program. However, since this study did not assess IC before participating in the program, the scores should be interpreted as the IC levels reported by Thai students after the program, rather than as evidence of an increase or improvement in IC directly resulting from participation in the program.

Together with the qualitative findings, the details of the experiences behind such self-assessments became clearer. Thai students described their intercultural learning through daily real-life situations, such as having interactions with Chinese lecturers and friends and encountering familiar and unfamiliar practices, as well as misunderstandings arising from differences in language, tone, and communication practices. These experiences have led some Thai students reconsidering their initial interpretations, opening them up to different perspectives and finding ways to manage unfamiliar situations. The qualitative findings not only affirm the Thai students' positive perceptions of their own intercultural competence but also indicate that intercultural learning, as perceived by the students, is relevant to their daily lives and experiences.

The highest mean score among four dimensions is the dimension of cultural understanding, whereas the cultural adaptation dimension had the lowest mean score; all dimensions nevertheless reached a relatively high level. The qualitative findings help explain these differences. Thai students demonstrated an understanding of cultural differences while also facing challenges in language and communication, as well as adapting their communication strategies to various situations. These findings indicate that understanding cultural differences does not always lead to easy adaptation in real-life situations.

When considering through the framework of Deardorff (2006), Thai students' experiences reflect elements of IC, including openness to differences, cultural understanding, and adapting communication and behavior to the situations. Additionally, these experiences conform with the experiential learning concept of Kolb (1984), which emphasizes learning through real-life experience. The findings of this study are consistent with the studies that indicate intercultural interactions and experiences can offer opportunities for learning and re-examining one's own perspectives (Deardorff, 2006; El-Asri & El Karfa, 2024; Thinh, 2024; Zuo & Hu, 2022).

However, many previous studies have revealed that participating in short-term exchange programs does not always lead to the improvement of IC (Goldstein, 2022; Lemmons, 2023; Wang et al., 2021). The outcomes may depend on the

quality of intercultural interactions, individual factors, student engagement, and program design (Iskhakova et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2024; Zhao & Liu, 2025). Therefore, the relatively high scores of IC found in this study should be interpreted with caution, as these are students' self-perceptions and may be subject to social desirability.

5.2 Cultural Similarities and Differences in Intercultural Learning

The findings indicate that the Thai students recognized cultural similarities between Thailand and China, particularly the importance placed on seniority, respecting elders, the relationships between lecturers and students, and some social practices. These similarities helped create a sense of familiarity and made students feel more comfortable at the initiative stage of participating in the exchange program. This aligns with research on perceived intercultural similarities, which suggests that learners' perceived similarities can be part of the adaptation process in a multicultural context (Jeon, 2024). Furthermore, research on Thai students at Chinese universities has found that attitudes towards the host culture and relationships with local peers play a significant role in social and cultural adaptation (Kingminghae & Lin, 2023).

However, these similarities do not mean adaptation is without challenges. Initial familiarity may lead some students to expect that behaviors or social norms in China would be similar to those in Thailand. When unexpected differences occur, students have to re-examine their interpretations and assumptions, such as communication styles, tone of voice, and social etiquette. Other studies related to the Thai Chinese cultural contexts found that although students may encounter some similar cultural contexts, differences in language, communication, and daily life remain challenges to cultural adaptation (Kingminghae & Lin, 2023; Xue et al., 2024).

The cultural dimension framework of Hofstede et al. (2010) can be used as a contextual framework to consider some of the cultural expectations mentioned by the students. However, national cultural dimensions should not be directly used to explain individual behaviors (Brewer & Venaik, 2014). Regarding Thai students' experiences in this study, cultural similarities create opportunities for students to compare the target culture differences encountered in daily life and allow them to re-examine their assumptions and interpretations. A recent study suggests that providing opportunities for learners to compare the target culture with their own culture can support their intercultural learning (Herawati et al., 2026).

5.3 Intra-Asian Context and Intercultural Competence

The findings suggest that the exchange program between Thailand and China offered Thai students' opportunities to face and interpret cultural differences through real-life situations. Some Thai students re-examined their expectations and assumptions when experiences were different from what they had anticipated; they then used various strategies to handle unfamiliar situations, such as observing locals' behaviors, seeking advice from Chinese lecturers and friends, and adapting communication strategies along with the context.

Interestingly, Thai students did not begin their exchange experience feeling that the Chinese context was completely different from that of Thailand but rather perceived both familiarity and difference at the same time. Therefore, this study suggests that intercultural learning within an Asian context can occur amidst coexisting familiarities and differences. Perceived similarities may help students feel more comfortable in a new environment, while the differences they experience in daily life may encourage them to rethink their expectations and adjust how they communicate and behave.

6. Conclusion

This research studied the level of IC reported by Thai students after participating in a two-month exchange program in China, as well as exploring Thai students' perceptions of cultural similarities and differences and their experiences with intercultural learning in a Thai Chinese context, using a mixed-methods research approach.

The research findings indicated that Thai students reported relatively high levels of cultural understanding after participating in the program. Qualitative data showed that Thai students learned from both the familiarities and the differences encountered in daily life, reflecting cultural understanding, openness to differences, and the use of various strategies to cope with unfamiliar situations. The findings suggest that intercultural learning within an Asian context can occur amidst both similarities and differences. Similarities can foster familiarity, while differences provide opportunities for students to re-evaluate expectations and adjust communication methods and behaviors according to the situation.

The findings can be used to inform the design of short-term exchange programs that promote reflective experiences, meaningful intercultural interaction, and cultural preparedness. However, since this study did not measure IC before participation, it is not possible to conclude that changes in IC are a direct result of the program. Future studies should utilize pre- and post-program measurements, as well as long-term follow-up to understand changes in IC more clearly.

7. Conflict of Interest

The author declares that no conflict of interest exists concerning the authorship or publication of this article.

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