How are They Different?

Teaching Chinese University Students in Thailand

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Introduction

Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand, began educating larger numbers of Chinese students in 2016. The Chinese students arrived in Thailand to take advantage of the proximity to southern China, English-language curriculum, and readily procured visas. Programs continued during the COVID lockdowns in Thailand via online platforms like Microsoft Teams, and enrollment resumed on-campus in late 2022, a strategy many Thai universities adopted sought to protect enrolments, and balance budgets. This has caused faculty and administration to evaluate how such international programs might continue post-pandemic. At the same time though, faculty and staff are getting a sense of the opportunities, risks, and difficulties associated with educating larger numbers of Chinese students in a Thai environment.[1]

As instructors and advisors in courses for Chinese, each author is aware of what it means to work with Chinese students at a "gut-level" first in our classrooms, and during the pandemic via Teams, and other on-line platforms used to deliver courses. Between the five of us, we had different experiences in traditional classrooms as advisors, and in administration of Payap international programs. We adapted, often incrementally, and through a process of trial-and-error new course designs, advising protocols, and classroom routines. Advice for students was modified to match the expectations and assumptions of both the Chinese universities and the students themselves on an ad hoc basis. Necessarily this was done in the context of Thai regulations for the accreditation, as well as our own pre-existing unwritten Thai expectations for what comprises a university education.

In the process, informally we each became aware that Thai and Chinese ideas about what is different for the Chinese students adapting to the Thai system. This is obvious in terms of regulations, which emphasize the way that credit hours are managed, admissions articulated, schedules made, and advising coordinated. These are the differences that become part of formal

[1] Descriptions of Thai Higher Education are found in Lao 2015, Crocco and Pinyomawul 2022).

advising programs and handbooks. Less obvious are implicit assumptions about the roles of advising, faculty, and students in creating a learning environment.

To begin understanding something about the informal "taken for granted" learning environment in international programs, in 2019, Payap University published a research report "Cultural Integration of International students at Payap University" using data collected in 2017-2018 (Waters 2019). Our conclusion emphasized that administrators should take internationalization of high education as an important goal in and of itself. Chinese and other international students are a rich educational resource. However, the day-to-day demands of running a university, also conclude was that it is often difficult to focus on students and faculty development for their own sake, and not as a driver of revenue and growth strategy.

We also note that Thai universities have an impressive capacity to innovate and establish new majors and international programs quickly, as will be described below. This seems to work well too for Chinese universities who bring assumptions from China, including formal requirements of their accreditors. An example described below was the MBA program at Payap University which was established within a few months for Guangxi University of Foreign Languages (GUFL). Important to the Chinese was that the Thai MBA program articulate with the semester at Guangxi University, so that students would maximize both residential time in Thailand, internet capabilities between China and Thailand, while maintaining their status as employees at GUFL.

Also interesting was the quick recalibration of programming for the Chinese students after a Taiwan program was discontinued in 2017. Out of this discontinuation came the new Thai Communication for Foreigners major. How this happened is briefly described below.

Theoretical Background: Menschenbild

This paper is part of a larger sociological project investigating how both international students and internationalizing institutions wrestle with cross-cultural issues (see e.g. Khunpatwattana et all 2018, Waters 2019, and Waters and Day 2022b). This particular paper is about how host country teachers bring sub-conscious mental pictures of what it means to be a teacher, student, and university (see also Waters 2019; Hofstede et al 2010), and how this interacts with the mental

pictures brought by students from other places, in this case, China (see e.g. Hofstede 2010:7-14, and Low et al 2020).

Menschenbild is a German word meaning literally "picture of a human," but actually means more. It is the picture a "we" has of itself, and a "bundle of deep convictions" held about what it is to be human. These convictions are typically sub-conscious and "taken-for-granted" as normal. Such "emic" convictions are a filter through which individuals and institutions define personhood, and ultimately membership. These are embodied in everyday life, and in German phenomenological traditions represent a "lifeworld." (see Zichy 2020:56-60, and Waters and Day 2022a). What is more, they are embodied not just in the lifeworld of the individual but institutionalized in the prescribed habits (*habitus*) of institutions which become a visible "societal map" for those who participate (Zichy 2020:63-64). Notably though, such lifeworlds are often invisible to newcomers, such as international students from China arriving in Thailand who in fact bring with them their own *Menschenbild*.

Thesis

Thai teachers at Payap University became aware of cultural differences for how Thai and Chinese students see the university classroom through the trial-and-error of experience. What was apparent to us before we started writing this conceptual paper, is that Chinese students, and Thai teachers, have different expectations of what is involved in the nature of the higher education, i.e. different "*Menschenbild.*" These are both sub-conscious and taken-for-granted, and partially incompatible. Recognizing that there are different *Menschenbild* with respect to higher education means that there will be misunderstandings and confusions in how teachers and students alike develop in an "international" university.

Our description in this paper includes inherent comparisons. Our many years teaching Thai students in a Thai context means that these often-unspoken assumptions—the *Menschenbild*—we bring to our teaching are Thai in origin. What is more the institution that the students study is Thai in origin, and as with institutions of higher education everywhere, bureaucratize perceptions of what a university student, faculty, and institution are.

Out of the Thai context with which we are familiar, and the Chinese with which we are not, emerged a cultural mosaic. Such "cultural mosaics" describes the way the *Menschenbild* of societies, and groups of people, integrate as a 'people.'

Chao and Moon (2005: 1129) point to three categories comprising an individual's "cultural" mosaic which are the (a) demographic, (b) geographic, and (c) associative features of culture. As will be seen, though, what teachers at Payap tend to focus on terms of "what is different" about the Chinese students reflects associative features i.e. the clash of the *Menschenbild* of the receiving institution and faculty (i.e. Thailand); and that of the sending students and institution (i.e. China). The demographic and geographic peculiarities of the students we received are the basis for how the mosaic of the associative features of culture emerge.

Degree Programs for Chinese Students at Payap University

Payap University in 2016 started a Chinese program taught in Chinese by Taiwanese instructors for students from PR China. The Taiwanese instructors left after two semesters, and the students transferred into either existing programs in the International College taught in English, or into programs in Business Management, Accounting, etc., usually taught in Thai, but in practice became a mixture of English and Chinese. Thai instructors in both General Education and major classes improvised to adapt to the new student body. The primary problem of course was language; the Chinese students did not necessarily speak English well, and few if any spoke Thai.

To cope with the influx, in 2017, a new major "Thai Communication for Foreigners" was opened. This program was organized, approved, and accredited quickly by the Board of Governors of Payap University, and the Thai Higher Education Commission in Bangkok. This program was designed for Chinese students (and other foreigners) wanting to major in Thai as a second language, and by 2018, there were approximately 70 students enrolled, most being Chinese. Students included both Chinese students from the discontinued Taiwanese program, and new students recruited in southern China.

In late 2019, Payap University was approached by Guangxi University of Foreign Languages (GUFL) to open an MBA program in English, which would be appropriate for university

instructors needing a master's degree. Forty MBA students were brought to Thailand beginning in January 2020. The students were teachers themselves who taught at the GUFL in Nanning. They needed master's level certification for professional development within the Chinese system. The program was tailored to the schedules and patterns brought by the Chinese students, including block classes, and seven-day per week schedules. The general idea was that a three-unit class of 45 hours would be completed across seven-nine days.

The speed with which programs were established, disestablished, and reconstituted is perhaps surprising for universities in North America. However, the above summary of "what happened," and "how we did it" administratively is straightforward from a Thai and Chinese perspective. Furthermore, an interesting—and more subtle—are the unseen taken-for-granted associative patterns that Chinese students brought from China, and how they fit in (or not) with what was already well-established Thai associative patterns taken-for-granted by the larger institution. Such associative factors are at the heart of what culture is and reflect underlying values and morals regarding education which the Chinese students would run into (see also Hofstede et al. 2010:4-13).

Conceptual Approach

This is the fourth study of Payap University and how it has internationalized its student body. Previous studies used survey data collected from international, Thai, and Chinese students about how they have adapted to Payap University.

This study focuses specifically on four Thai faculty (and one American) who were confronted with a need to quickly develop and adapt to an influx of Chinese students. We conducted focus groups among ourselves in both formal, and informal ways. Each of us prepared responses to a questionnaire, which we shared among each other. We also each contributed to the manuscript of this article as it was developed through editing, consultation, and more editing. The point of this approach is to provide an emic view of what it was like for Thai faculty to teach students from China who came to live in Chiangmai, and later went on-line during the COVID epidemic. In our preparation, we sought to understand the *Menschenbild* that we brought to our teaching, advising,

and program development, as well as the *Menschenbild* that our Chinese students brought to Payap University.

Findings & Observations

Summarized here are the issues that the authors noticed as they organized their classes for the Chinese students. Admittedly, these observations are idiosyncratic—for more systematic data the student demographics, and views, please see earlier articles (Waters and Day 2002a, and 2002b). The observations are by their nature impressionistic, and reflect the issues that the teachers notice, i.e. those areas where the Thai and Chinese *Menschenbild* clashed.

Value of Education.

We are all impressed that the Chinese students are studious and place a high value on academic achievement. They hold themselves overall to a high standard. There is also a strong belief among our Chinese students that a "foreign" degree is necessary for career advancement in China—and that a Thai degree will impress companies there. The Chinese students never raised objections to our teaching, even when we make mistakes. This makes our job easier on a certain level but we miss the give-and-take we are more likely to get from Thai students. Chinese students are also unlikely to blame the instructor for their inability to learn, or the grading of exams. Challenges to our grading standards are infrequent, unlike with Thai students.

On a certain level, they are similar to how we (WK, BM, TL, and TB) remember Thai students from 15-20 years ago, before university education became a default activity for 18-23 year-olds graduating from secondary schools in Thailand.

Attitudes Toward Teachers

As experienced college instructors in Thailand, what is most notable to us is the deferential respect Chinese students have for teachers. Teachers are deferred to, and students are humble in their approach to teachers in ways that Thai students are not. On the other hand, Chinese students seemed reluctant from our perspective to directly communicate with lecturers about many matters (see also Waters 2019:43-44)

Chinese students bring ideas, i.e. *Menschenbild* about classroom organization from China, which includes choosing a representative from within the class who presents student views of the students to faculty, staff, and administration, even about mundane personal matters. The result is that as individuals, Chinese students seemed to Thai faculty as shy and more diffident than Thai students who are more likely to present concerns directly to the instructor.

Related to the issue of communication between Chinese students, and Thai faculty, was a key person in the International Business Management program who was a Thai advisor who spoke Chinese and became a cultural intermediary. Chinese students would rarely go directly to an instructor regarding views of the class, and instead went to class representative or the advisor who would then approach the instructor. This included individual personal issues. In contrast, Thai students communicated directly to an instructor instead of going through an intermediary.

One of us believes that the Chinese students routinely select one member to be the representative. If that representative speaks enough English they may go directly to the Thai instructor, and if not matters come up to the Chinese-speaking counselor. Concerns and complaints were funneled to the leader, who was responsible for making the concern known to the instructor.

Collaboration Among Students and Group Work

We all observed that Chinese students tend to work alone more so than Thai students. Thai students reflexively form groups and generated a strong sense of group cohesion to assign tasks in a manner perceived as equitable. Free riders are of course possible, but it is not a central concern of the Thai student work group. We believe that facilitating this is the familiarity Thai students have with each other and their "seniors" as a result of the many ceremonies, rituals, and especially the unofficial initiation rituals (see below) which occur during the first weeks after matriculation.

Group cohesion is also perhaps facilitated by the frequency with which Thai students socialize in dining commons areas, and coffee shops. Chinese students seem more likely to socialize in smaller

groups which exclude outsiders. In Waters (2019) Chinese students also indicated a preference for studying alone in their rooms, rather than in groups.

The Thai instructors had different assumptions about how to organize group work, and study groups. One of us observed that when actual groups form, Chinese students seem more hesitant to accept people they do not already know into their groups, fearing that the new person will be a "free rider."

Chinese students avoid Thai initiation rituals, and ceremonies, to the extent they can. One common excuse is that they fear that there will not be food that they can eat—even students from Szechuan complain that the Thai food has too many chili peppers! The net result of this of course is that the Chinese students socially exist on an island, a situation that is further exacerbated by the fact that they are often on separate Chinese-determined semester schedules, and have separate classes conducted in English where there are only Chinese students.

Punctuality

Chinese students are in class before the assigned hour; a teacher who arrives on time in a Chinese class is likely to be greeted by a full classroom. This situation is unusual in Thailand, where understandings of punctuality are decidedly different. Thai students routinely show up after the appointed time, and there is often an assumption by Thai lecturers that class will start late, and if necessary, continue over time.

Chinese students are very concerned about the date and time that assignments are due. They are much less likely to ask for extensions, or exceptions to due dates. When they do ask, it is with attention to a specific date and time. We are impressed that Chinese students want to know the exact time of day that papers are to be handed in via the Learning Management System. Such a question generally does not occur to Thai students.

Class Leadership and Communication

Thai classrooms typically have a class leader who communicates with the instructor about general class interests and concerns, however this does not preclude individual students initiating contact with the teacher regrading individual issues. The cohesiveness of the groups that do form in a Thai classroom often emerge from the initiation rituals (see section 3.7 below), and group activities that are organized from the time of matriculation. Thai students are highly skilled at getting participation from each member of a group and avoiding "free riders." It strikes us that Chinese students are less likely to include students they do not know in their groups and are wary of "free riders."

Leadership among the Chinese students is somewhat opaque to the Thai instructors, although it seems to be present behind the diffidence. In part this seems to be because there is so much deference to the teacher, and presumably to the leader selected from among the students themselves. As is indicated in Waters (2019:43-44) data from the National Survey of Student Engagement conducted at Payap Chinese students are more hesitant about speaking to a teacher about academic or personal issues both inside, or outside class. What communication there is often occurred indirectly via an advisor, particularly if that advisor spoke Chinese.

In general, Chinese students prefer individual work, to group work, citing the problem of "free riders" from among students they do not know well. When group work happens, the Chinese students did say that they deal free riders with through fines, meaning students who do not do work pay to those who do. Such fines are mediated by the student leaders, and do not pass through the instructor—we only heard about this system indirectly.

Our impression is that unlike Thai students, Chinese students are much less likely to share personal and academic problems with their friends, or anyone outside their family. This struck us not so much as a lack of trust; rather it was a reluctance to cause teachers and fellow students disturbance about their personal problems. In Thai this is called "*Kreng Jai*," and is a quality Thai culture is known for. However, from the experience of Thai instructors in Thai classroom, it seems that Chinese students feel this even stronger than the Thai students we are accustomed to. This could

have been due to a lack of trust, but is expressed as being a hesitance to seem to "bother" us, in other words a strong sense of *Kreng Jai*.

Random Observations about Travel, Bureaucratic Pressures, and Gender

From a Thai perspective, it seemed Chinese students did not easily get annoyed when confronted with bureaucratic obstacles. They are patient with issues of visa renewals, and misplaced passports, more so than Thai students who do not need to deal with such issues. We (WK and BM) experienced that while travelling with Chinese students in Korea. The Chinese students were more independent travelers than were the Thai students. The Chinese students on the Korea trip needed little advice regarding travel, in the way the Thai students did.

Male Chinese students on the Korea trip seemed quite generous, particularly with the Thai female students. The male students insisted on paying for the meals of female students during a field trip to Korea, something that surprised the Thai women. During the trip to Korea, Chinese males also made a point of having full refrigerators in their room, from which all students could take food. One of the male students explained that his mother had instructed him to do this.

Initiations, university rituals, and Uniforms

In Thailand, initiation rituals are organized for first year students by the more senior students within each major. Students arriving from Thai secondary schools anticipate participating in these coming-of-age-rituals with a mixture of excitement and dread. The rituals are not explicitly supported by the universities, but organized by succeeding cohorts of students who pass along songs, chants, and histories specific to the major. These rituals are often abusive (Winichakul 2015), and subject to condemnation by faculty as extreme hazing practices. But the rituals also have the effect that over four years at the university, students are well-aware of who their senior mentors are, and it is on this basis cohesive study groups can form.

Thai initiation rituals for the first-year "freshy" create a sense of hierarchical "seniority" among students in succeeding years of study. The "senior" who starts out as a second year student, is the mentor for the "junior" who is the first year student. This continues throughout the years at the

university, and even beyond into the work force where cliques based in class membership persist, particularly from the more elite universities.

As for the Chinese students, they were confused by the Thai initiation rituals which were of course not part of any official orientation, and they hesitate to participate. We think that the Chinese students express their unease by referring to the food they would be asked to eat during the rituals, rather than by addressing their fears and confusions about a distinctly Thai practice. So the Chinese students said these rituals would put them at risk for eating food which they would not like, so no one would be happy if they went. Presumably this is a way to back out of what they perceived as the confusing, and perhaps abusive, nature of the rituals.

Thai universities also organize official rituals focused on Thai national celebrations, religious rituals, cultural events, and respect for teachers. Thai students are expected to dress in smart uniforms, and participate in such rituals, which are carefully choregraphed; Thai students raised in such traditions typically accept participation as routine. Formal credit toward graduation is not given for such participation, which is nevertheless normative.
Chinese students avoided such rituals and were often excused due to their status as foreigners. Lack of participation is exacerbated by the fact that schedules for international classes are different, with classes for Chinese classes adjusted to highlight interaction, with other Chinese students, rather than Thai students; in other words the Chinese programs become “island” programs, in the same way proprietary North American exchange programs study programs often do.

Uniforms are standard in Thai universities for all undergraduates and include a white shirt (with a tie), and black slacks for male students, and a white shirt and black skirt for female students. There are separate dress uniforms for ceremonial days featuring school colors, which for Payap University is light blue and white. There are also specific requirements for hair styles, shoes, etc. Such uniform requirements re not found in Chinese universities.

Oddly the Chinese generally complied without the resistance often found among Thai students who were more likely to have skirts, shoes, shirts, socks, and hairstyles which pressed the limits of university dress regulations.

Managing Language Problems

Language issues were probably underneath much of what we observed in classes (see also Khunpatwattana et al 2018). Chinese students did not always understand the lecturers, and for that matter, the students were often hesitant about expressing themselves. In the General Education classes for "Thai Communication for Foreigners," the classes were ostensibly in Thai, though in practice moved into carefully spoken English; since the Thai teachers did not speak Chinese, and de facto, the students did not yet speak Thai, and so English was the common language.

Strategies in class generally focused on letting Chinese students assist each other with the language barrier. This meant leaving time for informal translation, and emphasizing activities which involved pictures, computer practice, and other media which went beyond straight lecture in Thai or English. Chinese students fluent in English often had an advantage, even in a Thai class.

Politeness registers for Chinese and Thai are apparently different—even in English. Thus, a Thai instructor must take care to evaluate Chinese students work which often lacked deferential language that Thai student use in English. We are not sure to what extent this is an artefact of Google Translate algorithms for translating Chinese to English, and Thai to English respectively. Or perhaps it reflects different normative registers for expressing politeness. Nevertheless "impolite" language in English is something that Thai instructors often notice when reading English papers submitted by Chinese students.

Exams and Cheating

There are chronic concerns with the Chinese students regarding cheating, and the amount of assistance students are allowed on written work, and exams. We have a sense that Chinese students did get more assistance on writing assignments, particularly during COVID times when much of the university shifted on-line, and it became unclear who was actually did the submitted work.

The fact that students who barely spoke English often delivered well-enunciated presentations on Microsoft Teams also concerned us. Norms for what is "too much" editing purchased from Chinese and Indian editing companies have yet to emerge, too; guidelines for evaluating student work are really still emerging. Notably, English plagiarism detection programs like Turnitin.com are not yet generally used in Thailand.

Differences in norms for academic honesty were murky, in large part we think because understandings of what is legitimate vary between Thailand and China; weak English language skills also made evaluation of the situation difficult. There is an assumption that the academic integrity in norms for test-taking are the same in Thailand and China, but we do not really know if this is the case.

There is some concern that Chinese students would take advantage of language difficulties to skirt norms for academic integrity, using an excuse that they did not understand well the written instructions. The role of "cheat sheets" is one example. One of us (WK) remembers a cheating case that went to student judicial affairs involving such a cheat sheet. The student asserted that this was normative in China, an assertion that the committee was not able to evaluate.

Discussion and Conclusion

Thai universities like Payap demonstrated an impressive capacity to innovate and establish new majors and international programs quickly during the last five years. This seems to work well too for Chinese universities who typically demand particular criteria to address the assumptions of Chinese students, and accreditors there. An example was the MBA program at Payap University which was established within a few months for Guangxi University of Foreign Languages. The recalibration of programming for the Chinese students after the Taiwanese program disappeared was impressive too—out of this came the new Thai Communication for Foreigners major.

Having said that, the development of such programs presents faculty with unusual and difficult cross-cultural conundrums. And there is also a broader question about follow-up. Are the students

in such broad start-ups followed up with providing the services in terms of language and cross-cultural relations? In other words, is there an awareness of the differing *Menschenbild*?

Language issues try our patience the most. All of us experienced difficulties communicating with our Chinese students. Taking cognizance of this in scheduling, pedagogy, curriculum, and hiring decisions is important, even as it is often neglected in an institution dominated by Thai accreditation norms created in pasts decades to reflect a Thai *Menschenbild*.

Multi-lingual cross-cultural advising is also very important for communication between faculty and students. The bi-lingual Thai Chinese advisor was critical for program success. It is important that advisors and faculty have bilingual experience wherever possible.

While recognizing that with new programs, much is done by faculty "by the seat of the pants." It is important though that it be recognized in workload assignment. Work with students who are indeed wrestling with language comprehension issues is difficult and inherently time-consuming when done well. Administrators can also both enforce language requirements for matriculating students and provide incentives for faculty and staff to develop their own English and Chinese skills. These things need to be recognized in faculty workload accounting.

A related issue is the role of the formal student leaders that Chinese students bring with them. This structure can be a strength—though only if it articulates with the Thai system. Understanding this taken-for-granted Chinese *Menschenbild* needs to be more systematically understood.

Experience showed us too that coordinating daily, weekly, and semester schedules is also complicated when mixing Thai and Chinese views of the academic world. Chinese students bring different rhythms to their day and semester which need to be dealt with the cross-cultural issue, not simply as compliance. After all, the fact that Chinese students are so much more punctual is hardly annoying to a Thai instructor! But the emphasis of Chinese students on firm due dates, also did not necessarily fit with Thai strengths in flexibility, adaptation, and communication that the Thai students and faculty bring.

A problem is that much of this clash is dealt with by creating separate curriculum and schedules for the Chinese students. But separate curricula also defeats one purpose of having inter-cultural education in the first place. Where the students speak English (or Thai) well-enough, there could plausibly be mixed classes, i.e. the informal mixing of students from China and Thailand. Activities should be structured into the curriculum, so that the cross-cultural experience for all improves. The Thai ceremonies, and rituals would seem to be a prime place to do this. However, the reluctance of Chinese students to participate due to scheduling difficulties, food likes, or other factors need to be acknowledged and dealt with.

Which raises the question of how to effectively integrate Thai and Chinese students together so that both benefit from a cross-cultural environment? It is easy to simply acquiesce to Chinese demands to conduct the program under a Thai schedule. But when this happens, both Thai and Chinese students lose out on the opportunity to interact. Integration of university rituals could also be important, even when students are not awarded academic credit for attendance. To promote integration with Thai students, compromises on scheduling, rituals, and particularly involvement in the rich mosaic of Thai ceremonies, social activities need to be made. Identification of Thai students with their major, and the university is important—it goes beyond the accumulation of credit points, and formal graduation. This too is a "latent function" of a university relevant to Chinese students as well.

As lecturers we appreciate very much the discipline, punctuality, and respect, we receive from our Chinese students. Integrating students more will mean that our Thai students will also systematically be exposed to such values more. As for our Thai students, their ability to form study groups, and collaborate together in a fashion that avoids the "free rider" (without fines) problem is commendable. Perhaps they have something to teach the Chinese students, too.

Our summary point is that we would like to see administrative authorities be more intentional in promoting cross-cultural interaction in such programs. The mixing of Thai and Chinese students is by itself an important part of a higher education—the internationalization of the university is more than simply bolstering enrollment numbers and tuition collection. But doing this effectively

is a cross-cultural challenge with often unforeseen consequences. A key to this is an awareness of the difficult language issues for the education of Chinese students in a country like Thailand. Three languages (Thai, Chinese, English) are inevitably involved, which is complicated in any learning environment. Admission requirements for students, and staff development incentives for faculty and staff can all be directed at this issue.

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