

## Research Article

### Chinese students in Thai Higher Education Institutions and the Transformation of Graduate Migrants: Characteristics, Practices, and Transitional Migration

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#### Abstract

*This research article entitled "Chinese students in Thai higher education institutions and the transformation of graduate migrant: Characteristics, practices, and transitional migration" aims to clarify two objectives. Firstly, to analyze the determinants that motivate Chinese students to enroll in Thai higher education institutions and, secondly, to examine the particular characteristics and patterns of status involved in transitioning from student to graduate labor. Mixed research methods from in-depth interviews and questionnaires are employed in gathering and analyzing the finding. Criticizing Human capital theory, Chinese students in Thailand intend to invest in the Thai language to escalate their socioeconomic status. However, the popularity of the Thai language over the Vietnamese and Myanmar languages, which share a higher trading volume with Yunnan and Guangxi, represents the significance of Thai soft power through social media and healthier cultural linkage. Lastly, the length of stay among transforming Chinese workers depends on individual contentment. Applying social field theory, their economic capital mainly motivates short-term migrants. However, the pursuit of social and cultural contentment is the principal motivating factor attracting graduate migrants to reside long-term in Thailand.*

**Keywords:** Chinese student mobility, international students in Thailand, transforming migrant, competitiveness in China, Thai's public policy on skill-worker.

## I. Introduction

Globally, outbound Chinese students had climbed up from 38,989 in 2000 to 544,500 students in 2016 (China Statistical Yearbook, 2017) because of the over-demand for university seats in China and the preferences over foreign degrees. It is expectable that students predominantly go to developed and English-speaking countries, specifically, the U.S, U.K, Australia and Canada. However, some Chinese students enroll in Thai higher education institutions, and the amount has been increasing apparently. Referring to the Chinese embassy in Bangkok, enrollments by students from PRC have increased, from 11,545 to 22,076 and 30,526 in the years 2013, 2014, and 2015, respectively. The growing ratio at 33% in only one year is certainly remarkable and the benefits for Thailand from the influx of these students are clearly positive for Thai universities.

Thai institutions of higher education have been facing a continuous decline in the number of indigenous Thai learners from the demographic changes and the reformation of the country's university system. The emergence of Chinese students contributes a large amount of revenue to universities because they constitute the dominant body of foreign students in Thai institutions. As such, this research paper concentrates on illustrating the attractive and determinant factors of Chinese students in enrolling in Thai universities, which might provide essential information in formulating strategies to attract more qualified Chinese students.

The second argument involves the negative perception of new Chinese among local Thai people through social media, particularly issues with Chinese working in the wholesale and retail trading sectors, with

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Chinese tour leaders in the tourism industry, and with Chinese employees who were accused of job seizing. Unfortunately, the lack of information concerning new Chinese migrants in Thailand has provoked negative social discrimination because local Thai implies that most new Chinese are unlawful migrants. Empirically, the current population of Chinese nationals in Thailand can be classified according to four categories: entrepreneurs, employees, students, and workers. Chinese students who have attended Thai universities often seem to continue their stay by working or investing in Thailand after graduating. Such migration is associated with the high demand for Thai-Chinese speaking staff, thus boosting Sino–Thai economic interdependency. The emergence of Chinese students and graduates who have continued to work in Thailand has proved to be a turning point in the story of Chinese migration, with these new Chinese immigrants being well-educated and pursuing legal forms of residency. A second focal point in this research is to understand the transition from student to a migrant. This involves an examination of what motivates Chinese graduates to stay in Thailand and includes a deeper analysis of the individual characters of migrant graduates to determine or predict their length of stay.

This research aims to clarify two objectives concerning Chinese students and graduates: (a) to analyze the determinants that motivate Chinese students to enroll in Thai institutions of higher education, and (b) to examine the particular characteristics and patterns of status involved in transitioning from student to graduate-labor.

The qualitative research method has been employed to collect and analyze data pertaining to these issues. A research framework has been designed, based upon existing literature, to be inclusive of two concepts: human capital and forms of capital.

Briefly, human capital is mainly addressed by economists as an accumulated resource that develops people's efficiency. Education and migration are currently referred to as high-impact domains, particularly education which is criticized as a class-blockage agenda. Moreover, in this globalized knowledge economy, international experience is considered a valuable skill for job attaining and class escalating. Meanwhile, the capital's forms explain the ability to convert economic, social, and cultural capital, which identifies people's class. Being apart from the field where their positions are dominated by the reproduction of social class, thus, encourages them to perform their capabilities and accelerate their status. These concepts will be applied to analyze the transition to the workforce among Chinese students in Thailand.

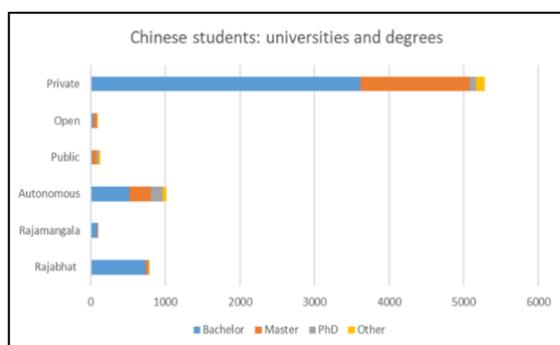
This study triangulates data from documents, interviews, and fieldwork observations. In total, 91 people were interviewed for this study; this sample includes 32 current Chinese students in Thai higher education, 21 Chinese graduates who were resident in Thailand at the time of data collection, 34 key informants affiliated with relevant organizations or directly related to Chinese graduates, and four returned Chinese workers. Participant selection generally involved snowball sampling. Data was also collected by way of 426 questionnaires distributed among Chinese students at 15 universities in Bangkok, Nakorn Pratom, Samutprakarn, Chonburi, Lampang, Chiang Mai, and Chiang Rai, with the choice of sampling locations determined in accordance with data on the distribution of Chinese students in Thai institutions of higher education. An additional 26 copies of the questionnaire were distributed among returned Chinese graduates, identified through online graduate networks, and to

Thai-language employees who had graduated from Yunnan and Guangxi.

## II. Motivation involving Chinese student migration in Thailand and the specific characters

Chinese student is not only the largest group of international students in Thai universities, but the wave of student flow is significantly increasing from 11,545 in 2013 to 30,526 in 2015. According to official data from the Office of Higher Education Commission, 71% of Chinese students enrolled in private universities, with English and Chinese being the languages of instruction. The most selected discipline is Business and administration (55%), followed by Thai language courses (13%). Typically, private university students take business and administration programs, while Thai language students are mainly in Rajabhat universities.

In terms of student backgrounds, the majority are female, Han ethnicity from agriculturalist and entrepreneurial families; and originate from middle to high-middle income areas, such as Yunnan, Guangxi, Sichuan, and Guangdong. Nearly 45% attend collaborative programs (3+1 and 2+2 programs), another 40% pursue a national degree, and the remaining take exchange and internship programs, as shown in table 1.



**Fig. 1.** Chinese students: universities and degrees (person)

**Source:** (Lertpusit, 2019)

While Thailand is not the most popular education destination among Chinese, a number of students have nonetheless chosen to attend educational programs in Thai universities. The reasons for this decision are varied. A number of scholars, Peter (Bodycott, 2009), Wang (Ross, 2010), Teixeira (Teixeira, 2017), Shen (Shen, 2005), Findlay (Findlay, 2010), Bodycott and Lai (Bodycott, 2017), Welch and Zhang (Welch, 2008), Biao (Biao, 2003) and Zweig (Zweig, 2004) indicate the motivation factors among Chinese students abroad as family and personal issues, the over-demand for university placements in China, a complicated local system of university entrance examinations, household responsibilities system, attractive overseas immigration prospects, social facilities, the lower cost of education, and greater privileges for returnees.

Considering the concept concerning globalization and internationalization in higher education (Foskett, 2012) and Human capital (Schultz, 1979), Chinese students in Thai institutions intend to invest in human capital. In the case of students majoring in Thai, most are from agricultural backgrounds. Meanwhile, 46% of their fathers earn approximately ¥3,000–6,000 per month. Another 30% receive less than ¥3,000. Based on a study of China's nationwide disposable income, which in 2016 was ¥23,821 per year (China Statistical Yearbook, 2017), many of these families are considered lower-middle class with fewer opportunities in the Chinese social structure and possess limited resources.

Referring to the survey on Chinese students in Thai HEIs, 2016, 52.8% reveal the Thai language as a "very important" influential factor. As many as 52.8% of Chinese students point out that they invest in language skills in order to increase their job opportunities. The reputation of the university is another significant factor as the potential discipline in

famous universities in Yunnan and Guangxi, which are the hometowns of Chinese students in Thailand, is ASEAN language programs, as shown in table 1. Enrolling in well-known programs in high-ranking *universities is a* critical strategy used among ordinary students in China.

SPECIALTY	NUMBER OF UNIVERSITY/COLLEGE WHICH OPEN ASSOCIATE PROFESSIONAL	GRADUATES (ANNUAL)
THAI	40 (Yunnan 19; Guangxi 11)	1500–1700
VIETNAMESE	25 (Yunnan 10; Guangxi 8)	750–800
INDONESIAN	13 (Yunnan 0; Guangxi 3)	100–150
CAMBODIA	8 (Yunnan 3; Guangxi 2)	50–100
LAO	8 (Yunnan 4; Guangxi 2)	250–300
BURMESE	16 (Yunnan 10; Guangxi 2)	150–200
MALAY	7 (Yunnan 1; Guangxi 1)	50–100

**Tab. 1.** Circumstance of ASEAN Minority language in Chinese universities, 2017

**Source:** Sunshine college entrance examination information platform (<http://gaokao.chsi.com.cn/>)

Referring to tab. 1. the popularity of the Thai language over Vietnamese and Myanmar language represents the significance of Thai soft power. Even Vietnam and Myanmar stand as the most important trading partners with Guangxi and Yunnan among ASEAN nations, the expansion of these languages turns out lower than the Thai language. Implying from this educational demand, cultural linkage and cultural transfer do actively impact students' decision-making as they absorb Thai pop culture through social media and entertainment channels. According to the concept of soft power (Nye, 2004), Chinese students partially integrate with Thai culture through cultural products such as Thai dramas and movies that ultimately persuade them to attend programs in Thailand where they feel comfortable to live.

Other remarkable factors include the emergence of formal academic cooperation in

the forms of MOUs, collaborative programs, personal exchange projects, and so on, which effectively encourage transboundary education mobility. Agreement on academic collaboration between Thailand and China was intensified through the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) by enhancing academic exchange and training programs (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015). Numerous dual degree and joint degree programs have been developed pursuant to the expansion of the collaboration, such as the Bachelor of Arts in Thai Language and Culture offered through the Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Rai Rajabhat University in collaboration with Yuxi Normal University (Office of the Higher Education Commission, 2013). The most effective activity between Thai and Chinese institutions is the personnel exchange project, for instance, exchange students and staff between these two countries accounted for approximately 55% of all exchanging personnel in Thailand (Office of the Higher Education Commission, 2013). Lastly, the affordable cost of studying and living in Thailand, as compared to other education destinations, attracts Chinese students from lower-middle to middle-income families. For example, studying in a general public university in Malaysia might cost approximately \$2,701–3,008 per year, while enrolling in a private university generally charge \$10,000. Meanwhile, the tuition fee for a private university in Thailand is approximately \$3,500.

### III. The migration experience and the transition from student to labor migrant

While these factors might serve as initial attractors for Chinese students to enroll in Thai higher education, they eventually become motivators for students to decide to continue their stay in Thailand by applying for

jobs and establishing businesses after they graduate. Corresponding to the tightening of economic ties between Thailand and China, the demand for Chinese-Thai speaking personnel has increased significantly. A report by the World Bank criticizes the slowdown in economic competitiveness and the middle-income trap as consequences of ineffective education. In other words, Thai persons perform below the basic proficiency in science, reading, and mathematics. Furthermore, the inadequate Chinese-skilled workforce from the coming aging society affects the growing demand in the labor market as well.

While the quality and quantity of Chinese-language graduates have not satisfied the over-demand for such workers in the Thai labor market, the high availability of jobs for Chinese graduates who are conversant in the Thai language and are integrated into Thai society is a significant factor. Approximately 50% of Chinese students express their intention to continue residing in Thailand, particularly those who have taken Thai language courses. However, under the Work of Alien Act B.E.2551, Chinese people can only apply for a Thai work permit under Section 9 and Section 12, general workers and investment promotion laws, under a quota system (4 local workers per 1 foreign employee), and their monthly salary must be over ฿35,000 (Ministry of Labor, 2017). These regulations limit the free flow of skilled legal labor while the high demand motivates Chinese people to apply for other channels, such as student visas, tourist visas, and so on.

Individually, the main determinants of students wanting to reside in Thailand include balancing the costs of staying versus returning. The cost comprises embedded skills, experiences, and connections, all of which are more beneficial for potential graduates if working or running businesses in Thailand. Compensation for such activities can come in

various forms. Graduates can earn a higher financial return in Thailand when compared to their anticipated wage and expenditure in China, particularly if they plan on residing in Guangxi or Yunnan. As the average monthly wage for Thai language graduates in China is ¥4,846 (or ฿22,776), while the initial salary for Chinese freshmen who are fluent in the Thai language is ฿20,000-35,000 (Table 1).

Other advantages of residing in Thailand include a less competitive workplace culture and less complicated social culture, issues that often prove to be an intense source of stress for Chinese youth. The criticized issues on working conditions in China among the new generation are the "996" –working from nine in the morning to nine in the evening, six days a week, and the seniority system embedded in Chinese working culture (Hruby, 2018). Chinese graduates who work in Thailand point out that work conditions in China affect their decision to migrate. Most are concerned about managing their time and trying to strike a work-life balance. Another key concern among Chinese students abroad is the guanxi-based structure of workplaces in China (Cheung, 2014). Graduates concerned about career achievement rely on their social connections rather than their potential work output, which causes tension in deciding whether to return to the Chinese labor market or not.

Several push factors, including a highly competitive job application process, inherently stressful workplaces that demand extra-working hours, seniority, power, and harassment, drive many Chinese workers to migrate out of the country. Thailand, on the other hand, possesses a number of pull factors for these Chinese workers, with a high demand for Chinese-speaking staff, a significantly less stressful working culture, more reasonable working hours, and significantly less competitiveness resulting in more

opportunities for workers to advance through their chosen career paths.

#### **IV. The characteristics and perceptions of Chinese graduates**

Human capital theory can explain the determining factors behind Chinese graduates; however, the theory cannot completely explain the character of short-term, long-term, or return migrants. Therefore, Bourdieu's sociocultural theory of capital has been used to better understand this phenomenon (Anheier, 1995). Social field theory describes three dimensions of capital—cultural capital, social capital, and economic capital—sources of power responsible for social stratification and the reproduction of social class. Cultural capital emerges in the embodied state, objectified state, and institutionalized state, which introduce skill and education as an effective form of capital that can be converted into economic capital (Bourdieu, 2007). These social factors have formed circular relations with each other leading to the strengthening and sustainment of migration (Chaichanavichakit, 2022).

Applying this theory to Chinese graduates in Thailand, their language skills, transcultural adaptation, and cultural integration are determined as their cultural capital. Meanwhile, social capital mainly depends on the effectiveness of one network-building activity. Connections, therefore, must be continuously reproduced as networks of relationships between people in a wide range of places. For Chinese graduates, social capital can be constituted in schools, universities, workplaces, Chinese communities, families, and so on. The implication of these social networks is the conversion from one form of capital to another. As a consequence, the reproduction of social class is reproduced from

these three dimensions of capital and inheritance from parents to their descendants.

Chinese students in Thailand, on the other hand, are typically from lower or middle-class families. As such, being in Thailand carries with it the possibility of upward social mobility and gaining privileges. Persistent migrants accumulate capital through advantages when living or working in Thailand. Thai language skills, and experience integrating into either Thai or Chinese culture, are considered advanced capabilities in the Thai labor market according to the cultural capital definition. Besides social class accelerating, self-esteem is recognized as another crucial motivation among Chinese graduates.

##### *a. Short-term mobile workers*

A large proportion of Chinese graduates returned to China after having worked in Thailand for a period by issuing economic returns as the most attractive factor. Most had worked in Thailand for approximately 3 years after graduation, classifying them as short-term migrants. Major obstacles for returned and short-stay graduates include Thai language proficiency, career advancement, family, marriage and social costs, goal accomplishment, and social integration. Those who fail to develop language skills often struggle to find a proper job, which can hamper their career path. Meanwhile, most of the well-paid jobs are sales and service providers, which mainly serve Chinese customers such as translators in King power group, real estate agencies, and the health service sector. Generally, these jobs offer a high salary for freshmen but do not have secure career advancement. Some graduates, in addition, aspire to reside in Thailand from the get-go, often for educational purposes, to gain international experience, or to amass financial wealth. After a period, however, they are still expected to return to

China for their parents' benefit and for marriage purposes.

*b. Long-term mobile workers*

Simultaneously, some graduates choose to stay in Thailand for more than 3 years or as long-term graduate migrants. These migrants typically work in educational institutions and Thai-Chinese business enterprises and run their own businesses, which generate high returns. However, almost 40% of long-term graduates earn less than moderate income, which indicates the significance of other factors apart from the financial returns. Another motivating factor that influences long-term migrants is the uncertainty of the Chinese social security system, such as the social restrictions on the possession of private vehicles, health care accessibility, and land-use rights under the Property Right Law (2007) (Zhang, 2015). A remarkable case is Q.X., who decided to give birth to his child in Thailand because "accessing to an effective health service in private hospitals in Thailand requires only money. On the contrary, no matter how much money you have, the service you get from a public hospital is very poor unless you have a reliable connection." Other regulations are, for instance, vehicle control regulations and, lately, the social credit system—used to rate people based on their trustworthiness and behavior. The system also allows for penalties to be issued by banning people from public service and transportation, such as airplane and bullet train rides. Such restrictions persuade long-term migrants to reside in Thailand.

In addition, Chinese graduates who decide to stay longer adapt themselves to Thai culture in terms of their lifestyle and living conditions. Over time, they also form their own families and communities to support their mental health while away from their homeland. Finally, achieving career or business

success abroad is often pivotal in their self-esteem development, allowing them to develop confidence that they can be successful individuals without relying on their parents' social relations. In short, Chinese-graduate migrants are capable of converting human capital into social and economic capital, and in reverse. Moreover, the pursuit of social and cultural contentment is the principal motivating factor attracting graduate migrants to reside long-term in Thailand.

#### **IV. Characters of graduate Chinese and the domination among new Chinese migrants**

Regarding the divergence of old and new waves of Chinese migrants, the new wave of Chinese is characteristically dissimilar from traditional migrant groups. Previously, Chinese migrants were low-skilled laborers from certain areas, such as Guangdong and Fujian, who flooded into Siam in response to the rapidly increasing demand for labor. Latter migrants have generally been better educated and come from numerous hometowns, such as Guangxi, Yunnan, Fujian, and other areas. The gender of these sojourners has also been more mixed. The uniqueness of Chinese graduates is their educational background and occupation. According to data collected, more than 50% of Thai language student intends to continue their stay in Thailand. They engage in numerous industries as interpreters, coordinators, and teachers. Therefore, their workplaces are possibly in academic institutions – from elementary schools to graduate schools – industrial estates like factories in Rayong province, and also companies in Bangkok. The distribution of educated Chinese in a variety of economic segments has raised a number of issues in relation to local people. As a colleague, A.T. respects the diligence and activeness of Chinese employees, describing Chinese employees as relatively more effective than

Thai staff. In addition, being educated and well-integrated into Thai culture, Chinese staff is perceived positively by surrounding communities in terms of socializing.

Most Chinese graduates living in Thailand do so legally, while illegal migrants tend to keep their stay short. Short-term workers apply for student visas from language schools in the hope of being issued a long-stay visa and working in Thailand. Consequently, a number of negative attitudes have emerged in relation to new Chinese who enter, work, and run businesses illegally. The growing number of Chinese graduates, however, is changing community attitudes among Thai people, with Chinese graduates exhibiting social responsibility and participating in Thailand's social security system by paying taxes. Individualism is another specific characteristic of Chinese graduates, many of whom live separately and are disconnected from larger associations, such as business networks. Lastly, Chinese graduates are typically middle-class, metropolitan freshmen. They usually settle in large cities, like Bangkok, Chiang Mai, or Rayong, places that are centers of modernity, jobs, and facilities.

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