



**STUDYING CHINESE SOFT POWER IN THAILAND  
THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGE**

**BY**

**KOLOSOVSKIY YAN**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS  
(ASIA PACIFIC STUDIES)**

**THAMMASAT INSTITUTE OF AREA STUDIES**

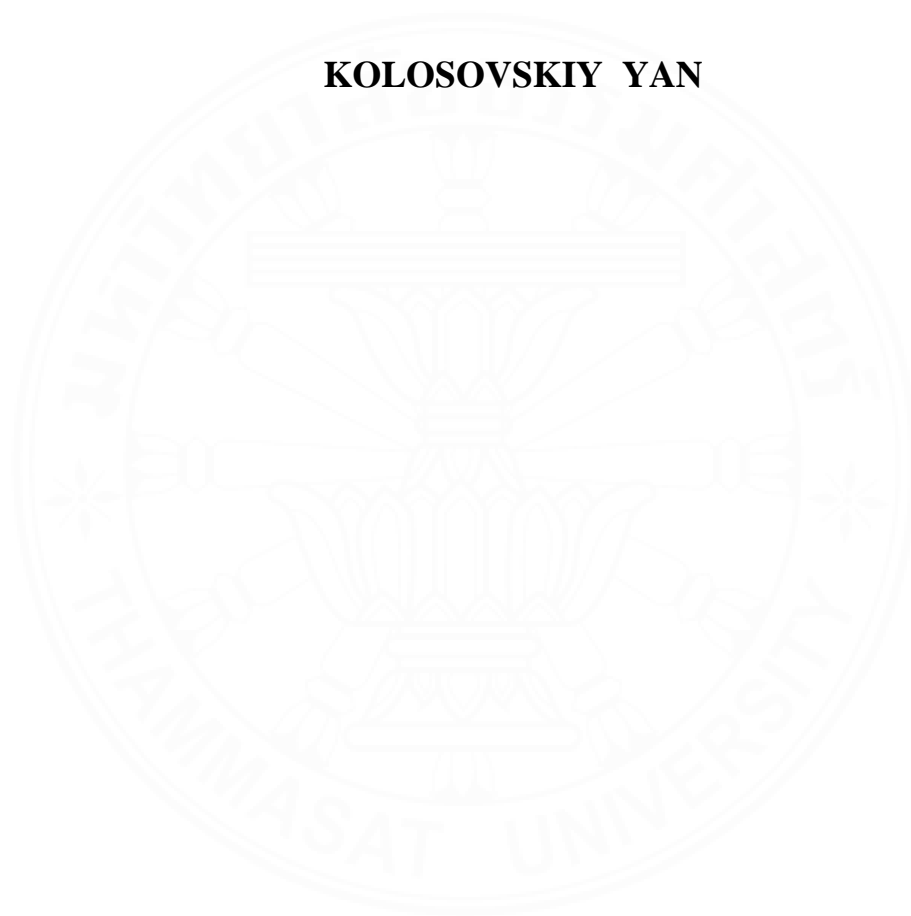
**THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY**

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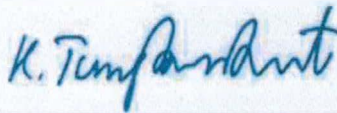
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the degree of Master of Arts (Asia-Pacific Studies)

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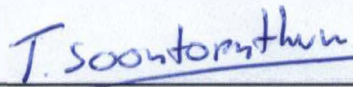
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## ABSTRACT

This study examines China's soft power strategy in Thailand, specifically through higher education exchange programs for Thai students. The study aims to evaluate how China's higher education initiatives affect Thai students and enhance China's soft power in Thailand. The study intends to investigate the impact of these programs on Thai students, their perceptions of China, and the broader implications for China's soft power in Thailand, addressing gaps in the existing literature.

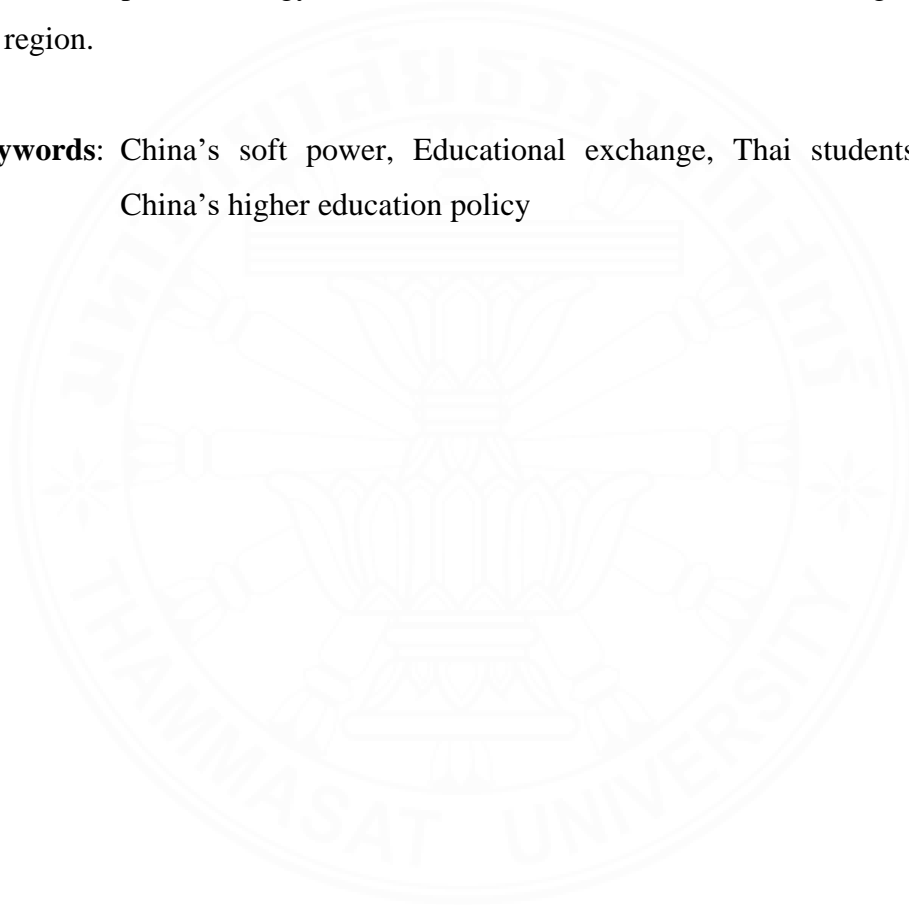
This study employs a multi-method approach, utilizing two qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis for the collection, analysis, and triangulation of data. The research sample comprises 21 Thai students who are pursuing their studies in various cities across China. The interview questions were designed to explore various dimensions, encompassing China's overall image, foreign and domestic policy, development model, education, and China-Thailand relationships.

The findings reveal that China's higher education programs have a positive impact on Thai students' perceptions of China, enhancing its soft power in Thailand. Regardless of the duration of their studies, Thai students reported a more favorable view of China, citing improved cross-cultural understanding, language proficiency, and exposure to Chinese society and culture. However, challenges such as communication

issues, inconsistent university policies, and academic support problems were also identified, potentially hindering the effectiveness of China's soft power initiatives.

The study underscores the impact of personal relationships and education in China on Thai students' perspectives. It offers recommendations to enhance China's soft power in education exchange with Thailand, contributing to the understanding of China's global influence through education. This research also provides insights into China's soft power strategy in Thailand and its relevance to other emerging powers in the region.

**Keywords:** China's soft power, Educational exchange, Thai students, Thailand, China's higher education policy



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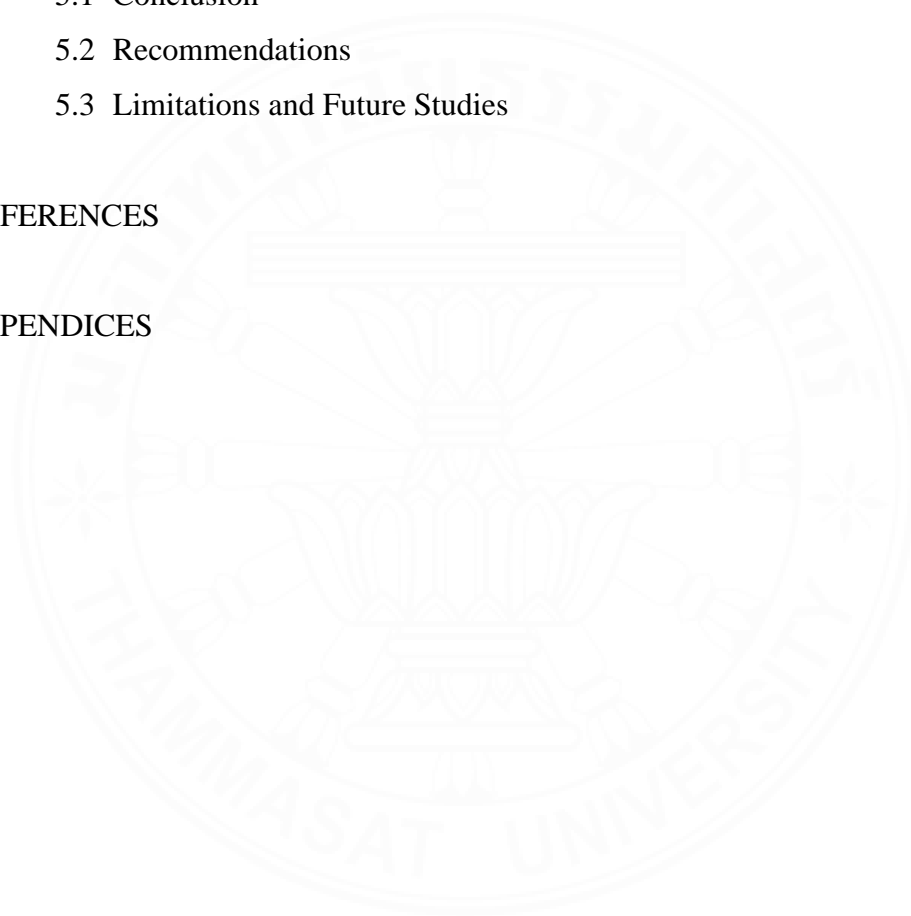
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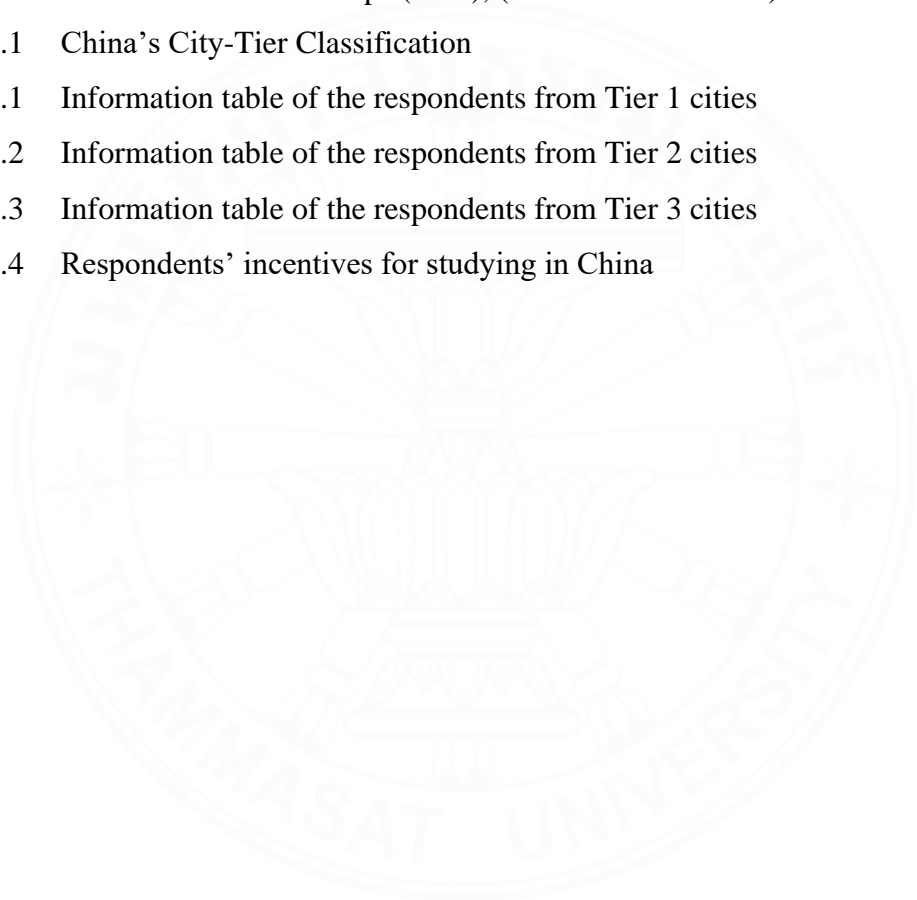


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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The introductory chapter of the research paper contains several sections that play a crucial role in establishing the research's context, relevance, and significance. Firstly, the chapter provides an extensive background to the study and highlights its relevance and motivation along with statement of the problem. Additionally, the chapter presents the research questions and objectives, which guide the research direction and focus. The chapter concludes by discussing the study's scope and limitations, which provide insight into the study's boundaries and potential areas for future research.

### 1.1 Background of the Study

China, the largest developing country, has made significant progress over the past 30 years through economic and social development, resulting in a marked improvement in the living standards of its citizens. The country has also improved its hard power, narrowing the gap with developed countries, and strengthening its military might. Furthermore, China has emerged as one of the leaders in soft power, extending its influence globally, including in neighboring Thailand. China is placing greater emphasis on the application of soft power in international relations, with Thailand being the preferred location for implementing this strategy, given its proximity and status as a major power vacuum zone. China employs various policy tools to exert its influence on Thailand, and among them, higher education exchange holds a considerable significance.

Thailand and China had trade and political ties dating back about 800 years ago, but tensions arose 100-150 years ago due to China's internal political events. When the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949, Sino-Thai relations became tense due to ideological differences. Thailand turned to the West, specifically the US, for support. However, in the 1970s, both countries made efforts to re-establish diplomatic relations, which was achieved in 1975. (Chinwanno, 2009)

Starting in the 1970's Thailand and China had a relationship once more, but were still not particularly close. It was not until the coup of 2014, where General Prayuth Chan-ocha's regime took over, that Thailand and China had a big upswing in their relationship. After the legitimacy of Thailand's new leadership was questioned, Western leaders imposed sanctions on the country, causing a diplomatic gap. China used this opportunity to strengthen its relationship with Thailand and even offered advice on how to resolve internal conflicts peacefully. (Chingchit, 2016)

Regarding economic relations, China was Thailand's top source of investment in 2022, as investors from the world's second largest economy channeled \$2.3 billion into the kingdom's key industries. (Regalado, 2023) China has also collaborated with Thailand on economic initiatives in the Mekong River area and the South China Sea, which are strategic locations for China as the former links to four other countries besides China and Thailand. Thailand has expressed its approval of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and has been actively engaged in projects aimed at enhancing the country's economy and connectivity. China and Thailand are working on a BRI project for a high-speed rail network that will connect Thailand, Laos, and southern China together. Clearly Thailand is open not only to BRI, but also to Chinese economic involvement, especially in investment and bringing in skilled workers for BRI projects. (Xinhua, 2018)

In this study, Thailand was selected as a site for investigation due to China has a strong foundation to build its soft power initiatives upon the significant enhancement in Sino-Thai relations in recent years. Thailand has exhibited receptiveness towards China, particularly in economic terms, but has also demonstrated openness towards other aspects of their relationship. Furthermore, China has supported Thailand in various ways, especially post-2014, which has generated political support for China. The warm relationship between the two countries enables China to easily carry out multiple soft power initiatives in Thailand, both through natural means and implemented programs such educational exchanges. While some of these programs are not exclusive to Thailand, they are part of larger organizations with connections across the globe. Overall, there are abundant opportunities for China to exercise its soft power in Thailand.

China's soft power efforts in Thailand through higher educational exchange is likely to have a significant impact, given the longstanding cultural and economic ties between the two countries. The number of Thai students going to China tends to increase annually. More than 30,000 Thai students are enrolled in study programs in China, making them the second-largest group of foreign students there, after South Koreans. (Bangprapa & Tangsathaporn, 2021) Therefore, there is some sort of influence for students to go to China from Thailand, and that China is building its soft power by hosting them. Thai students who have gone to China for studies often appeal to the economic opportunities that come with studying abroad in China. Students often talk about how learning Chinese will help them in later career and how much they expanded their understanding of China. There is no doubt that China has gained significantly in its soft power in the area of education targeting Thais. (The Nation, 2017)

Chinese education plays a significant role in China's soft power strategy in Thailand, exerting influence across various sectors. In economic terms, professionals educated in China make substantial contributions to bilateral trade and investment between China and Thailand. They facilitate business connections, promote cultural understanding, and possess language proficiency, thereby enhancing economic cooperation and generating opportunities for growth in sectors such as tourism, manufacturing, and infrastructure development. From a diplomatic standpoint, individuals with Chinese education often occupy influential positions in Thai government, business, and diplomatic circles. Their cross-cultural competence and network connections strengthen bilateral relations, facilitate dialogue, and foster mutual understanding between the two countries. Chinese education also serves to advance China's diplomatic objectives, including garnering support for its initiatives and expanding its regional influence. Furthermore, Chinese education has far-reaching effects on societal perceptions and cultural exchange. It significantly shapes how Thais perceive China, its values, and its cultural practices. Chinese educational programs introduce Thai students to the Chinese language, culture, and traditions, thereby fostering people-to-people exchanges and deepening cultural understanding between the two nations. Recognizing the pivotal role of education in fostering international relations and cultural exchange, the Chinese government, which advocates for a

“peaceful rise,” prioritizes higher educational exchanges to extend its soft power to Thailand. Therefore, it is imperative that both the state and society pay attention to this issue.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

The trend of a large number of Thai students pursuing their studies in China has become an established phenomenon, with a continuously growing number of students. In response, the Chinese government is enlarging its scholarship programs to attract even more Thai students to study at Chinese universities. This move comes as China seeks to strengthen its ties with Thailand, which occupies a prominent position in China’s foreign policy agenda. As a developed and influential country within ASEAN, Thailand is of significant political and economic interest to China. Given China’s increasing economic influence in Thailand, it is also striving to expand its soft power in education, culture, and other potential areas.

Based on the literature regarding Chinese soft power in Thailand, several gaps are found. The main problems are marked by the limited nature and lack of depth of research associated with higher education exchange. It is worth noting that in articles discussing China’s soft power in Thailand, the role of higher education exchange is often mentioned, but these issues are not considered in more detail. Studies of this kind simply point out the phenomenon that China practices soft power through hosting Thai students in China, however the authors do not delve into this issue. In addition, if China faces limitations in its approach to soft power, there is not enough literature on why this is the case, how China can fix or change the restrictions, or even why China is pursuing soft power in education at all through higher education exchange.

This thesis aims to address the limited understanding of the effectiveness of China’s soft power strategies through higher education exchange in Thailand. The main goal of this work is to bridge this critical gap by exploring and evaluating effectiveness of China’s higher education programs for Thai students in enhancing its soft power in Thailand.

### 1.3 Significance of the Study

The relevance of the chosen topic is due to the fact that recently the “soft power” of the state has been playing an increasingly important role in international relations. It seems to be one of the most effective ways to implement the foreign policy objectives of any developed country. In the rapidly changing modern world, “soft power” is gaining important strategic importance every day, especially for new centers of power, one of which is China. The emergence of “soft power” in the lexicon of world politics was associated with the transformation of political thinking and globalization. If earlier the effects of “soft power” were not expected or underestimated, today almost all states have realized its influence and have begun to pursue appropriate policies to the best of their ability.

In the conditions of the modern global economic order, the policy of “soft power” is becoming increasingly important in the general system of international relations. The practical tools for its implementation and the theoretical development of goals and factors differ in many ways in different countries. Particularly relevant in modern political science is the analysis of the impact on foreign policy of such cultural factors as education and science. In China, traditionally, it was the cultural instruments of “soft power” that were recognized as the most significant, which distinguished China from the understanding of “soft power” in Western countries focused on economic instruments of international influence.

The experience of China, which has made a sharp economic breakthrough over the past decades, while maintaining a socialist political ideology and management system and, at the same time, has not abandoned traditional cultural values, attracts a lot of attention from political scientists and culturologists. In the context of such rapid development, the problem of reforming China’s education system, which would meet both the country’s internal development and the challenges of modern globalization of the international goods and labor market, turns out to be one of the most difficult, and its successful solution becomes an important factor in the international image of the state and influence on international arena.

A review of the literature reveals that the role of education in soft power is widely acknowledged among researchers. However, the majority of academic work in



the field has focused primarily on the Western world, especially on the US. Research on China's soft power as it pertains to foreign students remains underrepresented and the research questions posed by the author have not been adequately addressed. Therefore, the analysis of the Chinese model of the implementation of "soft power", in which culture and education are considered as the most significant tools, is of great importance for determining the ways for further development of China, and can also help researchers and analysts from other countries in determining the prospects for implementing the "soft power" policy based on the achievements of the China's experience. For this study, the author named Thailand as a case study: being one of the leading countries in the region and exporting the largest number of students from ASEAN to study in China, Thailand is seen as a prominent case.

#### **1.4 Research Objectives**

This study aims to explore the experiences of Thai students with regard to China's higher education programs through the conceptual framework of soft power. Therefore, the research objectives are:

1. To study the influence of China's higher educational programs on Thai students in enhancing China's soft power in Thailand.
2. To identify the major shortcomings of China's soft power through higher education exchange in relation to Thailand.
3. To formulate recommendations for the Chinese authorities to improve its soft power through higher education exchange in relation to Thailand.

#### **1.5 Research Questions**

To solve the problem, the researcher intends to answer the questions put forward:

1. How does China's higher educational programs influence Thai students in enhancing China's soft power in Thailand?

1.1 How does the duration of studying in China influence the views of Thai students regarding domestic policy and development model of China?

1.2 How does the duration of studying in China influence the views of Thai students regarding foreign policy of China?

1.3 How do knowledge of the language, culture and society of China affect the consent and support of China's policy and development model by Thai students?

1.4 How does developing personal relationships with Chinese citizens during Thai students' studies affect the worldview of Thai students?

1.5 How do Thai students' personal development and growth get influenced by receiving education in China?

1.6 How does receiving education in China affect Thai students' perceptions of the relationship between China and Thailand?

2. What are the primary drawbacks of utilizing Chinese soft power via higher education exchange programs for Thai students?

3. What recommendations can be formulated for the Chinese authorities to enhance their soft power through higher education exchange in relation to Thailand?

## **1.6 Scope of the Study**

The scope of this study is focused on exploring the impact of China's higher education programs on its soft power in Thailand, through the experiences of Thai students. The study adopted a case study approach with a particular emphasis on Thailand and the concept of soft power. The scope of this study is confined to a limited sample size comprising of 21 Thai students enrolled in China's institutions of higher education. The research was limited to Chinese soft power in Thailand through higher education exchange and does not cover the entire Southeast Asia region. The chronological scope of the study was from May 2023 to March 2024, and as of March 2024, the study remains relevant.

## 1.7 Limitations of the Study

1. The foremost limitation pertains to the employment of language. In the present thesis, the author delves into the examination of China's soft power in Thailand. Nevertheless, the deficiency in expertise in the Thai language substantially restricts the author's access to indigenous resources in Thai. The incapability of employing the Thai language has resulted in the unavailability of first-hand local materials while searching for pertinent data, and the failure to take into account certain opinions of Thai authors published in their language. The language constraints have obliged the author to resort to mechanical translation of necessary articles to gain information access. This restraint has, to some degree, generated difficulties in the study and caused certain information and data to remain insufficiently novel or overlooked.

2. A constraint encountered during the author's research pertains to the possible confidentiality or limited accessibility of data pertaining to the construction of China's soft power in Thailand. Additionally, this field of the author's study has been insufficiently investigated, further impeding the availability of updated information. Consequently, this constitutes a limitation in the writing process.

3. The current study on China's soft power in Thailand through higher educational exchange has shed light on important issues and provided significant insights. However, the limitations of the study's relatively tight time frame and sole use of qualitative methods suggest that there is room for further research.

Following, conducting a quantitative study involving a large number of Thai students in Chinese universities is highly promising for expanding the possibilities of research and the practical application of its results. In addition, a quantitative study can serve as an additional confirmation in conjunction with the qualitative study conducted by the author. While qualitative research offers rich and detailed insights into individual experiences and perspectives, it has limitations in terms of generalizability and statistical power.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter presents a comprehensive literature review that aims to illuminate the concept of soft power introduced by J. Nye. It also intends to demonstrate the interconnectedness between soft power and education, with a specific emphasis on soft power through higher education exchange. Within the same section, the discussion focuses on Chinese soft power through higher education exchange as a practical tool for its soft influence. This section takes into account China's soft power in Thailand and emphasizes the current research gap on this issue.

Towards the end of the chapter, the theoretical framework of the study is revealed, which substantiates the theories upon which the author of the study relies. The culmination of this chapter is the development of research hypotheses, which will guide the empirical investigation of the topic.

#### **2.1 Joseph Nye's Concept of Soft Power**

The study of "soft power" cannot do without its author, J. Nye, on whose work all researchers of this theory rely. J. Nye's key works on this concept include *Soft Power*, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*, "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics", "The Powers to Lead", "The Future of Power". In addition, he has published articles related to "soft power", for example: "Propaganda Isn't the Way: Soft Power", "Think Again: Soft Power", "Smart Power", etc. It should be noted that Nye's point of view often raised questions from theorists and practitioners of international relations and was criticized by them. In this regard, the author's wording of "soft power" has changed over time, and the discussion in different circles on this issue continues to this day. (J. Nye Jr, 2008; J. S. Nye Jr, 2003, 2009, 2016; J. S. Nye, 2003, 2004, 2011, 2016, 2023)

In Nye's book titled "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power" Joseph Nye introduced the term "Soft Power." According to Nye, states can

achieve their strategic objectives without resorting to military might or warfare. Soft Power, as defined by Nye, refers to the ability to influence others and achieve desired outcomes through cooperative measures such as agenda framing, persuasion, and positive attraction. In essence, Soft Power entails the ability to attract others to achieve one's goals rather than using coercion or payment. (J. S. Nye Jr, 2016)

It is best to explain what soft power is by explaining its counterpart first—hard power. Hard power is using coercion and force or enticement to push an issue, specifically it is both military power and economic power. Hard power is the 'carrot and stick method.' On the opposite end is soft power. It is using attraction and 'agenda setting' to influence someone or something. Soft power is not about using incentives (which is economic power) or manipulation (which is sharp power) to create influence and power. (J. Nye Jr, 2008) In article "soft power and US-European affairs.", J. Nye argues that "soft" power is a more difficult tool for the state to use than "hard" power, for at least two reasons: many key resources are outside the control of the state, while "soft" power acts indirectly, creating the necessary political environment. Sometimes it takes years of waiting to achieve the desired result. But its result is the ability to shape the preferences of others, to make the state want to become the same. (J. S. Nye, 2016)

Soft power mostly comes out of co-optic attitudes and measures. Co-optic ways lead to soft power gains more than using commands, or hard power measures and behavior. There are a few places where soft power arises from—these are called soft power "currencies." These currencies are: cultural attractiveness, ideological attractiveness, values, and building international institutions. This is opposed to the currencies of hard power: sanctions, bribes, payments, and force. (J. S. Nye, 2004)

As mentioned, Joseph Nye invented the term soft power to denote the power of attraction in contrast to coercion in order to get "others to want the outcomes that you want". Further Nye writes: The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority). (J. S. Nye, 2004)

In simple terms, "soft power" refers to the ability of a country to attract others through its appealing qualities. According to theory, a country's "soft power" is based on three sources: its culture, political values, and foreign policies. Unlike "hard

power”, which relies on threats and incentives to ensure compliance, “soft power” requires that a state’s qualities inspire others to cooperate. For instance, examples of American “soft power” include foreign students studying in the United States, the global popularity of American media products, and the widespread acceptance of American political values such as freedom and individualism. (J. S. Nye, 2004)

In summary, soft power is a tool used in public diplomacy that uses influence and attraction, as opposed to hard power tactics, like military or economic power. Soft power has four main currencies used to grow and build soft power: culture, values, policies, and institutions. Even though soft power has specific currencies related to it, it is often hard to find soft power used only by itself in international relations. This makes it difficult to track. It is hard to measure due to the methods used to access the amount of influence or access opinions, mostly falling to polls. Soft power is about being co-optic. It is a power that comes from society, even though it is extremely useful in international relations and in-between governments.

Concerning different connotations between propaganda and soft power, propaganda is often viewed negatively and soft power sometimes facing similar perceptions. Joseph Nye has spent over two decades refining the idea of soft power, focusing on attractiveness and distinguishing it from coercion and manipulation. (J. S. Nye Jr, 2003) This distinction lies at the core, setting apart soft power from propaganda and similar approaches that involve deceit. Nye’s emphasis on attractiveness highlights the importance of voluntary and conscious choices made by the other party, introducing a novel element to the concept of soft power.

Propaganda often uses manipulative techniques, as opposed to “soft power”. The neoliberal approach advocated by Nye and the realist approach used in propaganda differ in regard to competition between states on the international stage. In a realistic approach, there is no distinction between propaganda and “soft power”. Nye emphasizes the difference between these views, but incorrectly refers Nye to a realistic position that questions the nature of “soft power”. The author proposes to replace the term “soft power” with “mutual power” to describe situations where the results are distributed among all participants, but the problem of uneven distribution remains. The author proposes to use neoliberal ideas through non-state actors, to develop secondary diplomacy and other means. (Knight, 2014) Nye distinguishes between “soft power” in

a realistic sense, including the attraction for the pursuit of self-interest and a situation where interaction leads to mutual enrichment and cooperation (neo-liberal approach). (Reinalda, 2016)

The relationship between the attributes of “soft power” and propaganda can be depicted schematically, with the option to add additional comparison parameters as needed:

**Table 2.1**

*Comparison of “propaganda” and “soft power”*

<b>Propaganda</b>	<b>“Soft Power”</b>
1. Allows imposition (coercion), as well as various types of incentives (rewards)	1. Does not allow for imposition or stimulation (opposite side must make their own choice)
2. It is likely not to work in the long run	2. Focused on long-term interaction with a partner
3. Uses manipulative strategies	3. Avoids manipulative strategies
4. Focused on a monologue	4. Focused on dialogue
5. The formation of trusting relationships is not the ultimate goal	5. Involves the creation of a trust relationship
6. Used within the realist concept (attention to self-interest, does not take into account the interests of other parties)	6. Used within the framework of the neoliberal concept (takes into account the interests of other parties)

Source: Lebedeva, 2017

Table 2.1 demonstrates contrasting characteristics between “soft power” and propaganda. Furthermore, Joseph Nye regarding “soft power” provided an explanation that emphasizes how “the best propaganda is not propaganda”. He further elaborated that in the information age, the most valuable resource is credibility. (J. Nye, 2012)

## **China's Soft Power Concept: Development, Objectives, Tools and Differences**

Upon the release of J. Nye's initial publications in the 1990s, a discourse emerged within the Chinese academic community regarding the substantive dimensions of the "soft power" concept and how it could be effectively integrated into Chinese foreign policy theory and practice. One of the initial points of contention revolved around determining the most appropriate translation of "soft power" into Chinese. Several options were considered, ultimately favoring "ruǎn shíli". This term was employed in Hu Jintao's address at the 17th Party Congress and has since become the preferred term used in official discourse. (Hu, 2007) The growing attention directed towards the study of "soft power" in China is further evidenced by the increasing number of articles devoted to this topic in recent decades. An examination of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the largest specialized Chinese database encompassing academic works and journals, indicated the following findings: the term "ruǎn shíli" and its less prevalent alternatives, such as "ruǎn quánli" and "ruǎn shìli", appeared in the titles of six works during the period of 1990–2002, 535 works from 2003–2007, 2,925 papers from 2008–2011, and a noteworthy 7,694 papers related to soft power research as of 2023.

Prior to its widespread adoption in political discourse, a Chinese political theorist and currently one of the top leaders of the Chinese Communist Party Wang Huning introduced the term "ruǎn quánli" in his article titled "Culture as a national power: soft power" (Wénhuà zuòwéi yī zhǒng guójiā lìliàng: Ruǎn quánli). (H. Wang, 1993a) This article, published in 1993, holds significant importance as it explicitly addressed the topic of China's soft power for the first time, sparking a debate on the suitability of soft power in relation to Beijing's foreign policy. In the article, Wang Huning eloquently defined the role of culture as a national force, highlighting its gentle and enduring influence on the global stage. The author posited that if a country possesses a vibrant culture and a compelling ideology, other nations are more likely to gravitate toward them. As such, there would be no necessity to rely on hard power, which is both costly and less effective. (H. Wang, 1993a) This article presented a preliminary framework for the concept of soft power, as developed by Nye, with a clear emphasis on culture as the primary source of China's soft power. Since then, the process



of constructing Chinese soft power in the modern era has commenced, and although it encountered initial challenges, it diverged from the general acceptance of soft power in the United States by emphasizing its strategic utilization to enhance China's influence.

M. Fliegel and Z. Kriz assert that China's soft power has evolved and developed over many centuries, even before the term itself emerged in the West. (Fliegel & Kříž, 2020; Hayden, 2011; Hayden, 2011) During the imperial era, China's objective was not to forcefully dominate other nations but to become the center of influence that others would follow. (Fliegel & Kříž, 2020) The Republic of China, which succeeded the Qing Dynasty, also employed similar techniques, corresponding to the contemporary understanding of soft power, to gain Western support in the Second Sino-Japanese War. It wasn't until the 2000s that Chinese leadership began emphasizing the importance of soft power, both domestically and internationally, although the primary focus remains on domestic affairs. Presently, China is actively engaged in spreading its soft power, which President Xi Jinping considers an integral part of the Chinese dream of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

As a historical example, we can use the treatises of Confucius. Confucius believed that power, using coercion ("hard power"), subjugates people, forcing them to do something against their will, which leads to their unwillingness to follow in the forerunner of the interests of the other side. Confucian teaching distinguishes three components - persuasion, attraction and submission. If the first two components represent "soft power", then submission includes such a hard method as the use of physical power. From the point of view of Confucianism, the people are shaped by their cultural activities, and strict adherence to high morality is vital for maintaining the commonality of the Chinese state, therefore, the Chinese authorities at all times are obliged to carefully treat the moral consequences of their cultural policy. (Lukinskiy & Savkovich, 2018)

With the appointment of Hu Jintao as president in 2002, the concept of soft power entered the country's agenda. Following Hu Jintao's mention of China's "soft power" during the 17th CPC Congress in 2007, the concept gradually became integrated into the party's ideology. The Chinese understanding of "soft power" was first articulated in a political report at the 17th Congress of the ruling party, outlining

specific goals for enhancing the state's "soft power" within the framework of building socialism with Chinese characteristics. The report emphasized four key areas:

1. Build up the system of socialist core values and make socialist ideology more attractive and cohesive.
2. Foster a culture of harmony and cultivate civilized practices.
3. Promote Chinese culture and build the common spiritual home for the Chinese nation.
4. Stimulate cultural innovation and enhance the vitality of cultural development. (Hu, 2007)

It should be noted that the forwarded topic of "soft power" at the same 17th Congress of the CPC was included in the section on culture, and not on China's foreign policy. Therefore, it can be argued that China's "soft power" operates to a greater extent in the "culture-centric dimension". With regard to cultural instruments, the policy, which was first established within the attractiveness of the state's historical background, was developed by the Chinese administration. In the 2006 National Cultural Development Plan, a new expansion plan was proposed with the aim of spreading Chinese culture to the world and highlighting its cultural products in comparison to all products. (Medushevsky & Ermakova, 2022)

Hu Jintao's report at the 18th congress of the CPC called for a noticeable increase in cultural "soft power", a significant variety of cultural products, the creation of a system of public and cultural services, the transformation of the cultural industry into a supporting branch of the national economy. Hu Jintao stressed the importance of bringing Chinese culture abroad in order to create a powerful socialist cultural power. In the report, China was recognized as an innovative economy state, ready to implement the implementation of "soft power" in an economic way. (Hu, 2012)

Since President Xi Jinping assumed office, China has significantly intensified its efforts to enhance its soft power. This has been demonstrated through a series of relevant initiatives undertaken by the country. (Tian & Lowe, 2018) Subsequently, in January 2014, Chairman Xi Jinping emphasized the importance of developing soft power to cultivate China's national image, propagate contemporary Chinese values, and showcase the captivating aspects of Chinese culture to the international community. These statements were followed by an extensive program

aimed at bolstering China's presence on the world stage, employing various tools to enhance its soft power capabilities. (Shambaugh, 2015) Furthermore, during the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2017, Chairman Xi delivered a compelling speech in which he introduced the concept of "socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era" and the pursuit of the "Chinese Dream" of national rejuvenation. Xi asserted that this framework provided a fresh option for other countries and nations seeking to expedite their development while preserving their independence, offering Chinese wisdom and an alternative approach to addressing global challenges. (Biswas & Tortajada, 2018)

The discourse surrounding China's "soft power" strategy demonstrates a notable inclination towards culture-centric elements, rather than the promotion of a compelling political ideology and associated values. This emphasis on culture as a foundation can be attributed to the Chinese leadership's recognition, at that particular juncture, of the country's limited ability to offer globally competitive value systems and ideological narratives that could rival Western ideals of freedom and democracy. Furthermore, given China's relative economic and technological lag compared to its more developed neighbors at the time, a direct comparison of Chinese societal prosperity was not feasible. These factors contributed to a deliberate choice to prioritize the promotion of culture, traditions, and values as the primary components of China's soft power approach. Consequently, the strategy placed significant emphasis on cultural and historical motifs, idealized representations of imperial China's golden era, the advocacy of pan-Asian values, and the implicit presentation of Confucian values as a natural counterpoint to Western individualism and liberalism, thus subtly expressing a sense of anti-Western sentiment.

China's pursuit of soft power can be attributed to several factors, with one significant viewpoint expressed by American journalist Joshua Kurlantzick. According to Kurlantzick, the Beijing government places considerable emphasis on soft power to alter the perception of China as an aggressive country struggling to handle regional issues, as perceived in global public opinion. (Eisemann & Mitchell, 2007) While Kurlantzick's interpretation finds support among many experts, they also assert that China has formulated a strategy to enhance its economic resources through soft power

policies. This strategy aims to bolster China's position in addressing regional challenges and diminish the influence of the United States.

Currently, most researchers identify the following main objectives of PRC public diplomacy (Glaser & Murphy, 2009; Kharitonov, 2017; Kivimäki, 2014; Z. Liu, 2009; Naumov & Polozhevich, 2018; Wuthnow, 2008):

1. Shaping the image of China as a country dedicated to creating a harmonious society and prioritizing the well-being of its own citizens rather than seeking external expansion. This goal aims to highlight China's efforts to improve the lives of its people.

2. Building the image of China as a stable, reliable partner and a peaceful country emphasizing that cooperation with China will lead to mutual prosperity. The concept of a "peaceful rise" is used to counter the perception of China as a threat "Chinese threat". China actively participates in international organizations and engages in various forms of public diplomacy, such as educational exchanges, aid diplomacy, and diaspora engagement. Key initiatives promoted include the "Chinese dream," the "Community of common destiny for mankind," and the Belt and Road Initiative.

3. Positioning Chinese culture as unique, ancient, and capable of complementing global culture. The emphasis is on promoting a nuanced understanding of China without relying on stereotypes, which is believed to foster understanding and respect for other countries. This is facilitated by entities such as Confucius Institutes and Chinese broadcasters operating abroad.

4. Holding events and initiatives aimed at the domestic audience to restore pride in the country among the Chinese population. China seeks to showcase its achievements to the international community, with events like the 2008 and 2022 Olympic Games serving as examples of this approach. This element is important for bolstering national pride and garnering recognition for China's accomplishments.

According to M. Fliegel and Z. Kriz, Beijing employs various means of communication, such as official media outlets, to comprehensively convey information about Chinese history, culture, politics, and other related aspects. Additionally, the Chinese government establishes international platforms to showcase itself as a responsible global actor. In terms of soft power, China places significant emphasis on its cultural component, which is more widely understood within China compared to the

Western perspective. This cultural component encompasses leading by example and moral virtue. It can be argued that, in China's understanding, culture already encompasses the key elements of soft power outlined by J. Nye. The Chinese leadership recognizes the importance of cultivating a positive national and international image in order to build a strong country. Consequently, the merging of soft power and socialist culture holds strategic significance for Beijing. (Fliegel & Kříž, 2020)

Professor Wang from Renmin University emphasizes that the key to bolstering China's soft power lies within the domain of public diplomacy. Since the collapse of the socialist bloc, Chinese public diplomacy and its soft power as its main task have sought to achieve; 1. formation of the desired image of the state, 2. change in the distorted perception of China abroad (to eliminate anti-Chinese sentiment), 3. improvement of the international situation around China, 4. encouraging foreign countries to pursue favorable policies towards China, 5. improving China's reputation in the eyes of its own citizens and among the foreign public. (Y. Wang, 2008)

A variety of initiatives and resources have been introduced in China to actively develop public diplomacy and build soft power. These efforts include promoting education and learning Mandarin, culture and religion, engaging with the media, establishing diplomatic ties, developing tourism and sports, strengthening ties with the Chinese diaspora, as well focusing on economic aspects. In addition, China sends medical workers and teachers abroad. Notable is the increase in the number of foreign students coming to study in China and the increase in the number of foreigners showing interest in learning Mandarin. (Sanguanbun, 2015)

Regarding the differences between Chinese and American soft power, M. Fliegel and Z. Kriz determined that there is a fundamental contrast between the soft powers. They assert that American soft power is characterized by its diffuse nature, being largely decentralized and unrestricted. In contrast, Chinese soft power is described as tightly structured and centralized, reflecting the highly centralized and top-down nature of China under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The authors argue that Beijing strictly adheres to its policies from the highest to the lowest ranks, resulting in senior officials exerting control over any interactions involving soft power. Consequently, the authors suggest that from a Western perspective, particularly

an American one, this phenomenon could be labeled as propaganda, although Beijing refrains from using this term due to its negative implications. (Fliegel & Kříž, 2020)

The Chinese leadership adheres to the principle of cultural diversity of “soft power” in a multipolar world, which fundamentally distinguishes the Chinese understanding of this concept from the American one. (Naumov & Polozhevich, 2018)

The divergent nature of Chinese soft power compared to its American counterpart becomes evident upon analysis. The Chinese approach finds its roots in ancient philosophy and fundamental socialist values, actively endorsed by the government. Chinese theorists primarily perceive soft power as a tool for driving social development, thereby establishing substantial distinctions from the American model, which predominantly operates in an ascending manner with actors undertaking their work relatively unencumbered by government restrictions. Additionally, non-governmental organizations, civil society, and the entertainment industry assume a pivotal role within the American framework.

Joseph Nye, when comparing the soft power of the US and China, noted that China still does not have global cultural industries at the level of Hollywood, and the level of its universities does not match the American ones. More importantly, Nye notes that China lacks a multitude of non-governmental organizations, which Nye considers one of the main sources for promoting soft power according to his concept. Chinese officials seem to believe that soft power is generated predominantly through government policy and public diplomacy, but much of America’s soft power is generated by its civil society rather than government, which Nye argues is a distinct advantage of American soft power in relation to China’s one. (J. Nye, 2014)

In Chinese culture, the perception of power differs significantly from that of the Western context. While Western politics defines power as the capacity of one actor to shape the attitudes and behaviors of another actor, the ancient Eastern tribute system considers not only the ability to exert power but also the level of acceptance of that power by the recipient. This highlights a fundamental distinction between the two cultural perspectives on power. (Glaser & Murphy, 2009)

Thus far, the Chinese leadership has primarily emphasized the utilization of “soft power” and acknowledged culture as the fundamental aspect of this strategy, with “harmony” serving as the underlying principle of its cultural values. China has

consciously refrained from endorsing political values in its approach to soft power, as such a stance would deviate from the prevailing global political discourse and potentially be interpreted as a direct challenge to Western liberal ideology. Simultaneously, there exists a perception that, given China's current stage of development, it lacks the capability to articulate universal ideas capable of captivating not only neighboring societies but also people from diverse civilizational backgrounds across different continents.

Hence, to a significant degree, China's utilization of soft power can be perceived as a defensive mechanism aimed at projecting a favorable image that counters the prevailing notion of the "Chinese threat." (Liu & Tsai, 2014) This perception has roots not only in the contemporary era but also traces back centuries ago, during the active expansion of Chinese civilization. Within Chinese strategic circles, soft power is regarded as an integral component of comprehensive power, serving as a crucial metric to assess a state's international standing and influence and a means to secure advantageous positions in global competition. Consequently, numerous Chinese analysts argue that soft power is intrinsically linked to China's ascent. By harnessing soft power, China endeavors to achieve a peaceful and stable international environment, foster friendly and harmonious relations with neighboring regions and strategically significant countries, which are crucial for Chinese security against external threats, and maintain internal stability.

## **2.2 Soft Power and Education**

Currently, the educational aspect, commonly referred to as the "level of internationalization in higher education," is increasingly emerging as a critical element within the array of soft power instruments. Consequently, countries are actively adopting strategies to augment the influx of foreign students enrolling in their institutions while also promoting the participation of their own students in educational programs abroad. Renowned academic establishments often serve as attractive hubs for international students. Additionally, well-educated students tend to possess extensive engagement and interconnectedness with the global community, thereby bolstering the soft power of the host country.

As noted earlier, education is included in the arsenal of the “soft power” of the state, since educational and cultural potential acts as an effective way to influence the surrounding world. The institute of education, by its unique nature, is of great importance for society, can be used to solve foreign policy problems, thereby ensuring the national security of the state. Thus, education as a cultural and educational potential has a complex impact on broad aspects of society, which is why it is often used in the international arena as a tool of the “soft power” of the state.

Until recently, the field of international relations had overlooked the importance of education. However, the emergence of the concept of “soft power” drew attention to education as a significant aspect of state activity. (Leping, 2018) Joseph Nye defines it as the capacity of an international actor to accomplish their goals without using force or coercion but rather by relying on their appeal and persuasion to persuade other nations to embrace their views or values. The efficacy of “soft power” is contingent on the extent to which other actors in international politics are receptive to the cultural influence and values of the “attractive” actor.

Nye states, that higher education falls under the category of high culture in Soft Power, whereas popular entertainment belongs to the low culture domain. As a result, higher education is a vital Soft Power resource. (J. S. Nye, 2004) The factors that contribute to this include the ranking of higher education institutions, their research output, quality of faculty, level of internationalization, attractiveness to international scholars and students, and collaboration with prestigious foreign institutions. Moreover, higher education serves as a Soft Power instrument in terms of generating national goodwill, enhancing the image and appeal of the country, and attracting foreign students. (Peterson, 2014; Richmond, 2003; Wang, 1991; Watson & Lippitt, 1958; Wilson & Bonilla, 1955)

The model of educational soft power proposed by Wojciuk, Michalek, and Stormowska consists of three elements: values, resources, and tools. This model suggests that the use of soft power in higher education can be reinforced by conveying the values of the host country to international students, providing quality education to foreign students, and utilizing higher education as a means to accomplish a country’s policy objectives. (Wojciuk et al., 2015)



That is why researchers of “soft power” often emphasize the importance of education. For example, the provision of educational services to foreign students is one of the most important tools of the “soft power” of the state. During their student years, young people develop ideological values and views. Creative-minded and inquisitive students from other countries actively study the language of the host country during their studies and get acquainted with the achievements of science and culture with sincere interest. Such students acquire valuable social capital and, returning to their homeland with a new baggage of accumulated knowledge, connections, sympathies and new friends, as a rule, become effective conductors of the language and culture of the country where they studied. As a result, the effectiveness of influencing the outside world with the help of national education as an instrument of soft power is ultimately much higher than with the help of military or other levers of pressure. (Lebedeva & Faure, 2009)

J. Nye, speaking of “soft power”, is sure that in the information age it is important whose story will prevail. (J. Nye, 2005) And all the ideas and impressions from the received education play a decisive role in the choice of “history”.

Higher education programs have proven to be a successful approach to utilizing education as a means of exercising “soft power,” as demonstrated by the US experience. This strategy enables the education of foreign nationals over an extended period, allowing for an impact on the younger generations within the intended audience.

Almost all participants of the Fulbright program stated that after studying in the United States, they began to understand this country and its culture better. They told their compatriots about life and study in America. In addition, they noted that the experience gained in the United States allowed them to take a high post at home. (Tsvetkova, 2007) As evidence of this, consider the following data: during the Cold War, approximately 600-700 thousand individuals participated in international educational programs offered by the United States. Out of those, around 200 became heads of state, while approximately 600 more held prominent positions in governments, ministries, and parliaments across different nations. (Tsvetkova, 2007)

Education, being a “soft power” tool, enables “us” to demonstrate the persuasiveness and attractiveness of “our” values and principles. With information on scientific and technological advancements, fashion, and lifestyle readily available,

many aspire to explore the world and stay abroad. Hence, it is a wise and profitable strategy for countries to attract students to their educational institutions, leading to improved image and relations among different nations. As a result, these students become representatives of their country of study, and their involvement in politics, economics, and science strengthens the ties between their homeland and their alma mater.

In summary, no person or state can achieve success without a strong intellectual foundation, which education provides. Education as a “soft power” tool is an essential source of attraction for countries, drawing students worldwide. The quality of education is critical for building a benevolent perception and serving as a resource for development and an instrument of external influence.

### **2.2.1 Soft Power through Higher Education Exchange**

Siqi Gao’s scholarly inquiry centers on examining China’s soft power in the Arab world, with a specific focus on the role of higher education. (Gao, 2015) The primary research question pertains to the efficacy of China’s higher education initiatives for Arab students in bolstering China’s soft power in the Arab world. Gao employs a mixed- methods research design, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Drawing upon the soft power framework and the findings of Zielinski, Atkinson, and Dwyer, the author develops a set of hypotheses to assess the extent to which Arab students’ exposure to China during their educational tenure affects their inclination to embrace China’s soft power.

In her research, Gao conducts a quantitative analysis by scrutinizing a survey that was jointly administered to 112 Arab students who pursued their studies in China. Through statistical analysis of the survey data, Gao aims to gain insights into how studying in China influences the perceptions of Arab students regarding China and its impact on China’s soft power in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The findings of Gao’s analysis suggest that studying in China can have a positive effect on the attitudes of Arab students toward China, which in turn, has the potential to bolster China’s soft power.

Despite the insights that quantitative analysis provides, Gao acknowledges that the open-ended questions in the survey have limitations when it

comes to conducting qualitative analysis. Therefore, to complement her quantitative analysis, Gao employs a qualitative approach that involves conducting interviews with eight Arab students. The interviews explore various topics, including the students' impressions of China, their experiences of university life in China, and their personal development and comprehension of Sino- Arab relations. By incorporating these interviews, Gao obtains a more nuanced understanding of the individual experiences of Arab students studying in China.

Drawing upon her mixed- methods analysis, Gao draws the conclusion that China can heighten its soft power by offering university programs to Arab students. The length of time that students spend studying in China and their first-hand exposure can facilitate their comprehension of the Chinese language, culture, mindset, and society in ways that are unattainable otherwise. Gao's research uncovers that nearly all of the surveyed Arab students manifested an elevated familiarity with Chinese culture, language, and society as a consequence of their study abroad experience, and the vast majority of them expressed more positive attitudes toward China overall. Additionally, many of the participants envision pursuing careers that are conducive to the future development of Sino- Arab relations, which could have implications for China's soft power in the region.

Romi Jain has addressed the issue that South Asia is not exempt from China's outreach in higher education. (Jain, 2018) To this end, his qualitative study investigates the experiences of South Asian students with China's higher education programs in relation to China's explicit and implicit soft power policy objectives. The aim of Romi Jain's study was to fill a critical gap in the existing literature that mostly excludes the South Asian region where China is rapidly expanding its strategic influence. It aimed to contribute to the literature on the China's soft power in education.

The study employed a case study approach, using Nepal as a site for an in-depth research of Nepalese students' academic, socio- cultural, and political experiences concerning China's higher education policy and programs. Romi Jain contends that the research questions necessitated qualitative research methods, which facilitated a deeper interaction with participants to uncover their experiences in a foreign country or institution. The theoretical framework for the study was soft power

concepts, and the data sources included interviews with 20 Nepalese students (including alumni) and six experts, as well as secondary sources.

The author's findings reveal that Nepalese students admired certain aspects of China's political system, particularly governance, and foreign policy, as well as some traits of Chinese society. However, the Chinese education program had deficiencies in brand reputation, and Chinese cultural penetration remained challenging. Furthermore, social ills, such as racism and color discrimination, were prominent in Chinese society.

According to Carol Atkinson's comparative analysis of Student Exchange Programs spanning from 1980 to 2006, US-based educational exchange programs offer a means for individuals from non-democratic nations to gain first-hand experience of democratic societies. (Atkinson, 2010) Although Atkinson's research doesn't explicitly focus on the notion of soft power, it does exemplify its underlying principles.

The author's article first examines the historical impact of student exchanges on their participants and how they have influenced political behavior in their home countries. Atkinson then considers the conditions under which exchange programs are more likely to be effective conveyors of norms and ideas across geographic and ideological borders. The author argues that at least three contextual conditions make some exchanges more influential than others:

- (i) the depth and extent of social interactions that occur while abroad;
- (ii) the sharing of a sense of community or common identity between participants and their hosts;
- (iii) the attainment of a politically influential position by the exchange participant after returning home;

To test these hypotheses, Atkinson employs a new modeling approach: generalized multilevel longitudinal models. The results of her analysis support the assertion often made by proponents of soft power: US-hosted exchange programs can play a vital role in the diffusion of liberal values and practices across the borders of authoritarian states.

Atkinson evaluates the extent to which educational exchanges function as one mechanism of the broader phenomenon of soft power. The empirical evidence confirms what soft power advocates and US policy makers have often claimed: US-hosted educational exchange programs do play an important role in supporting the development of liberal values and practices in authoritarian states. Such programs are systematically associated with liberal trends and serve a crucial function in liberal norm diffusion. Finally, Atkinson presents her hypotheses, presents results, and discusses policy implications. The empirical evidence confirms what advocates of exchanges 16 have often claimed: US-hosted student exchange programs can play a significant role in the diffusion of liberal values and practices within authoritarian states. Bulent Aras and Zulkarnain Mohammed undertook a study to examine how the noted that the Turkish government has integrated the concept of soft power into their foreign policy strategy and leveraged various soft power tools, such as state-sponsored educational scholarship programs, to attract international students. (Aras & Mohammed, 2019) The goal of their research was to close the knowledge gap by examining the key features of the Turkish government scholarship program (Türkiye Bursları) and its impact on Turkey's soft power and wider foreign policy goals.

To achieve this, the study proposed three hypotheses and utilized a mixed methods research approach, including a survey that incorporated both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques. The survey method involved online surveys and face-to-face interviews with beneficiaries of the Turkish government scholarship program, which allowed for an understanding of the role of time spent in the host country, language, culture, society, and environment in cultivating soft power among foreign students.

The research findings suggested that the Turkish government scholarship program has contributed to the promotion and diffusion of Turkish culture and has made Turkey more attractive to international players. However, the study also identified the need for reforms to enhance the competitiveness of "Türkiye Bursları" relative to other scholarship programs worldwide. Overall, the establishment of a higher education scholarship program is a positive step towards improving the desirability of Turkey's higher education institutions and enhancing its soft power capacity. Furthermore, educational exchange plays a crucial role in spreading the state's cultural

values and creating a pool of intellectuals whom the state can rely on as it builds and strengthens relationships with governments across the world.

E. Jiracheewong, T. Natjumnong, Ch. Yaemkhayai conducted the research on evaluation the effectiveness of the provision of Chinese scholarships for international students as tools for implementing China's soft power. (Jiracheewong et al.,2020) The research employed a mixed methods approach to gather comprehensive data. The qualitative-led study involved collecting data from documents and conducting face-to-face interviews with 34 international students who received Chinese government scholarships. The participants represented various study levels, including non-degree, undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs, and came from 34 different countries. The qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using tabular analysis to identify key themes. Additionally, certain quantitative findings were utilized to support and reinforce the qualitative results, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

The research findings indicate that Chinese scholarships for international students have both positive and mixed results in terms of implementing China's soft power. The qualitative study revealed that while the research sample group did not give significant importance to the soft power aspect of the scholarships, there were real benefits observed. These benefits included increased societal openness, communication, knowledge, technical skills, and enhanced economic relationships with trading partners in the global south.

On the quantitative side, the study showed that the experience of studying in China for at least one year significantly improved most attitudes and beliefs about China among the research sample group. This improvement was particularly notable in their perceptions of China in general, Chinese people, Chinese education, and the Chinese government. However, it was observed that students did not achieve these improved beliefs equally, with Confucius Institute students being more likely to demonstrate positive changes.

Furthermore, the research indicated that even if students were not explicitly aware of the soft power objective, their overall attitudes toward China improved over time. This suggests that international student scholarships can effectively contribute to China's soft power, although the long-term effectiveness of

this approach remains uncertain based on the quantitative findings. Overall, the research concludes that Chinese scholarships for international students are a somewhat effective tool for generating soft power for China.

### **2.3 Higher Education as a Tool of China's "Soft Power"**

In the pursuit of China's vision of the "Asia-Pacific dream" which encompasses the resurgence of the historic Silk Road and the establishment of a Maritime Silk Road, higher education has recently been acknowledged as playing a crucial role. A key strategy to facilitate this endeavor is the recruitment of international students, with a specific emphasis on attracting students from developing nations and countries along the Belt and Road Initiative. (Sebastian & Choudaha, 2015) According to Rui Yang, a subtle but influential form of soft power is to educate intellectuals, technicians, and political elites from other countries, as demonstrated by Great Britain during its imperial peak and the United States since the 1950s. China is now taking on this role by actively recruiting students from all over the world, particularly from developing nations, who are likely to develop an understanding of Chinese perspectives and interests through their exposure to Chinese language, society, culture, history, and politics. (R. Yang, 2007)

At present, China is actively engaged in international cooperation in the field of higher education in several areas. Andrey Bobylo identifies 3 directions. The first direction is to attract foreign students to study at Chinese universities. In this context, the Chinese leadership is investing heavily in expanding its participation in international cooperation in the field of higher education. They actively attract foreign students through grants and various scholarship programs, even at the expense of the Chinese budget. China has also significantly expanded the list of available academic programs, contributing to a regular increase in the number of foreign students pursuing higher education in the country. In addition, the second direction is to send Chinese citizens to study at foreign universities, including student exchange programs. Also, the third direction includes the creation of joint programs and networking with foreign universities. Moreover, China's image as a new giant in the global economy is attracting

young people who see China as a promising hub for their business careers. (Bobylo, 2017)

In 1993, as part of the educational reform and development efforts, China started focusing on developing collaboration in the field of education and learning from the experiences of other countries. Two years later, in 1995 and 1997, regulations were put in place to facilitate cooperation with foreign universities. This led to an increase in partnerships and joint educational projects, which in turn attracted more foreign students to China. By 1996, the number of international students had reached 41,000, a 30% increase from 1992. Since 1999, an annual educational tour has been organized to provide students from 20 countries with the opportunity to explore the possibilities of studying in Chinese educational institutions. (MoE, 2009)

China expanded its collaborations with other countries in various forms, such as sending Chinese students and teachers to partner countries and inviting foreign students and teachers to China. In addition, new mechanisms for cooperation in education were introduced, including grants, joint educational programs with foreign universities, a double diploma system, and the introduction of foreign and bilingual programs. From 1979 to 1999, a total of 342,000 foreign students had studied in China. (Shvedova, 2013)

The Chinese government has been playing a leading role in the development and reform of higher education since 1985 at the end of the Cultural Revolution. Inspired by Western practices, the Chinese government has gradually given priority to development and Sino-foreign higher education exchanges, seeking to strengthen China's global influence and promote the internationalization of higher education. This commitment is evident in China's Five-Year Plans and five pillars of education policy. (H. Wu, 2019)

The Five-Year Plans, which were introduced by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1953, have played a crucial role in shaping China's economy and overall development. According to a content analysis conducted by Wu Hantian, these plans and their accompanying policy documents highlight the Chinese government's commitment to a non-unilateral approach in fostering the internationalization of the country's education system. (H. Wu, 2019)



**Table 2.2***China's Higher Education Policy Based on its Five-year Plans*

<b>Five-Year Plans</b>	<b>Higher Education Policy</b>
8th Five-Year Plan period (1991-1995)	Promoting higher education international cooperation and exchange, improving the treatment for returning overseas/returning Chinese students, and optimizing the policies related to overseas studies
9th Five-Year Plan period (1996-2000)	Concentrates on exploring new models of running universities and implementing Project 211 for developing over 100 Chinese universities into high-level research universities in the twenty-first century
10th Five-Year Plan period (2001-2005)	Importing and utilizing foreign education resources, attracting overseas talent and returnees, and supporting overseas studies
11th Five-Year Plan period (2006-2010)	Emphasizes the importance of recruiting returning overseas Chinese students and attracting overseas talent
12th Five-Year Plan period (2011-2015)	Aims of developing world-class universities and establishing globally influential scientific and technological innovation centers
13th Five-Year Plan period (2016-2020)	The objectives of enhancing collaboration between China and Belt and Road (B&R) countries encompass various areas such as education, science and technology, culture, environmental protection, health, and Chinese medicine. China's strategy involves the creation of an "education community" with B&R countries by facilitating the sharing of high-quality educational resources, establishing the "Silk Road" government scholarship, improving the mutual recognition system for academic qualifications, fostering student and academic exchanges, fostering increased cooperation between higher education institutions, and encouraging Chinese universities to establish collaborative overseas institutions.
14th Five-Year Plan period (2021-2025)	Enhancing the "double world-class" initiative involves reinforcing the fundamental research and collaborative innovation capabilities of colleges and universities. It also entails improving the operational conditions of 100 undergraduate institutions in the central and western regions and establishing high-level public health colleges and prestigious teacher training colleges.

Source: NPC, 2021; L. Wang, 2014; H. Wu, 2019

The National Plan for the Reform and Development of the Education System, adopted by the Chinese government within 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-2010), showed the main directions planned to expand the internationalization of Chinese education: 1. increase the number of foreign students; 2. increase in the number of Chinese government grants for studying foreign students; 3. funding for research conducted in China by non-Chinese students; 4. growth in the number of educational programs conducted in foreign languages in Chinese universities; 5. improving the quality of education; 6. Implementation of a plan to study overseas Chinese residents with government subsidies; 7. expanding global student mobility. (Qian, 2020)

Over the decades of development, Chinese education has managed to demonstrate good results, among the famous graduates we see the following names, for example, the former President of Ethiopia, Mulatu Teshome, a graduate of Peking University, the former President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Joseph Kabila, studied at the National Defense University of the People's Liberation Army of China. Another more striking example is Karim Massimov, the former chairman of the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan and twice the country's prime minister. Massimov studied in Beijing and Wuhan. According to many reports in the Chinese media, among the graduates of the Nanjing Army Command School there are 5 presidents, 1 vice president, 1 prime minister, 8 defense ministers, including the first President of Namibia, Nujoma Sam. (Leping, 2018)

With the development of education and the expansion of communication around the world, Chinese education has become more attractive to foreigners, thus forming an effective soft power channel through educational programs and exchanges.

Several decades ago, China hosted a limited number of foreign students, typically no more than 10,000 individuals annually. However, since the 1990s, the number of foreign students has experienced rapid growth, which has continued over the past decade or so. This positive trend has prompted China's leadership to aspire to maintain and increase this growth in the future. In September 2010, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China released a 10-year plan entitled "Studying in China," which aimed to make Chinese education the top choice for foreign students in Asia by 2020, with an enrollment of over 500,000 students. (Jia , 2010) Based on the latest statistics show that in 2018 there were 492,185 international students from 196

countries pursuing their educational programs at 1,004 higher education institutions in China's 31 administrative units, marking an increase of 3,013 students (0.62%) compared to previous year. (MoE, 2019; Textor, 2022a) Which supposed that China's recruitment targets have been met successfully.

It is important to consider that most international students in China mainly come from Asia and the less developed regions of the world, which correlates with China's policy of integrating developing countries into its Belt and Road arbitrage. According to the same official source, approximately 60% of international students in China are from Asia, and combined with Africa, these two continents account for over 76% of the total. (MoE, 2019) Moreover, evidence suggests that these students from Asia and other less developed countries primarily choose full-degree programs at Chinese higher education institutions, while students from developed, mostly Western countries predominantly study the language in short courses without obtaining an academic degree or participating in short-term student exchange programs. For example, although the United States and Japan are among the top ten providers of international students to China, they do not appear in the top ten when only students pursuing an academic degree are considered. Non-degree students comprise nearly half (47.56%) of all international students in China. (P. Yang, 2022)

By developing the country's education system, China has become one of the world leaders in the provision of educational services. In an analytical study of the most preferred destinations for education, China entered the top three behind only the US and the UK. (Textor, 2022b)

In addition to the Chinese Government Scholarship, there are other scholarships in the PRC to help international students study in China, such as the Great Wall Scholarship, the Outstanding Student Scholarship, the Confucius Institute Scholarship, the Regional Scholarship for ASEAN, Central Asia, Africa, and a wide range of provincial, city, university scholarships provided by their authorities. (Zhigulskaya, 2017)

For several decades of educational relationship between ASEAN and China, a large number of bilateral agreements have been concluded to increase the number of scholarships and number of exchange students. At an early stage of cooperation, only state scholarships (CSC) were allocated. The number of scholarships

and students has noticeably increased after the start of joint forums, foundations and unions. Thus, at this stage, there are many governmental and non-governmental scholarships for international students from ASEAN and Thailand in particular. (Tarabarko, 2017)

Chinese policy places great importance on achieving a more balanced representation of international students from various regions in their universities. Nonetheless, an alternative perspective suggests that China should prioritize attracting students from neighboring countries, particularly Southeast Asia and Central Asia, over seeking diversity among foreign students. (Wen, 2015) This viewpoint is rooted in President Xi's aspiration to leverage education as a means of advancing the Belt and Road Initiative and enhancing China's influence in the neighboring region.

As China is gaining recognition as a growing hub for international education, while the rising ASEAN countries are also becoming exporters of their talents for high-quality education abroad. With Chinese universities beginning to take the lead in world university rankings, China has a valuable tool to improve relations with ASEAN countries through the admission of ASEAN students and bringing them into its sphere of soft influence. (Velasco, 2022)

A vivid example of the Chinese government's commitment to cultivating its soft power through education can be seen in the example of CSC Scholarships. The China Scholarship Council (CSC) plays a vital role in attracting international students to Chinese universities and demonstrates significant public investment. In 2018, CSC scholarships funded 65,000 international students, which is approximately 12% of all international students in China. The National Scholarship Fund (NSF), with a total value of 469 million US dollars (3.32 billion RMB) in 2018, offers a variety of scholarship programs to students around the world. These scholarships cover tuition, accommodation, meals, and a monthly stipend of between \$350 and \$500 (2,500-3,500 RMB). (Fedasiuk, 2020) Table 2.3 enables an analysis of the investment per scholarship recipient, depending on the specific degree of study:

**Table 2.3**

*Expenses of China's government for a student under Chinese Government Scholarships (CSC), (Calculation in RMB)*

Degree	Field of Study	Tuition (Annual)	Student Residence (Annual)	Stipend (Annual)	Medical Insurance (Annual)	Total
Bachelor's	A*	20,000	6,000-12K*	30,000	800	58,800
	B*	23,000	6,000-12K	30,000	800	61,800
	C*	27,000	6,000-12K	30,000	800	65,800
Master's	A	25,000	6,000-12K	36,000	800	63,800
	B	29,000	6,000-12K	36,000	800	67,800
	C	34,000	6,000-12K	36,000	800	72,800
Ph.D.	A	33,000	6,000-12K	42,000	800	71,800
	B	38,000	6,000-12K	42,000	800	76,800
	C	45,000	6,000-12K	42,000	800	83,800

Field of study: A – Economics, Law, Liberal Arts, Education, Management, the rest of Social Sciences, B - Exact Sciences, Engineering, Agriculture, C – Fine Arts, Medicine.

Student Residence: Accommodation fee varies depending on the university. 8000 RMB was taken as the median amount.

Source: China Scholarship Council. (CSC, 2023)

Moreover, the vast majority of developing countries – BRI countries, especially states on the African continent, have become the center of Chinese educational diplomacy. The Ministry of Education of China reported that as of 2018, there were 81,562 African students studying in China. (MoE, 2019) This indicates that China has become a sought-after destination for African students pursuing education abroad, ranking second only to precedent countries among African students. China actively utilizes its education sector as a means to exert soft power and influence on the global stage, with a particular focus on geopolitically significant regions. The Chinese government has notably increased the number of scholarships available to African students, increasing the availability and attractiveness of Chinese universities on the continent. (Mulvey, 2020)

In addition, China extends a significant number of scholarships to African students. One notable example is the China-Africa Cooperation Forum (FOCAC) in

2018, during which Beijing pledged to offer 50,000 scholarships for Africans to pursue studies in China. (Benabdallah & Robertson, 2018) This commitment surpasses the scholarship programs provided by China's competitors such as the UK or the US. (Adetunji, 2017; Mulvey, 2020) It is crucial to recognize that the provision of scholarships is not an isolated incident but rather a fundamental aspect of China's public diplomacy and its framework for providing financial assistance to developing nations. China consistently offers scholarships for various educational purposes, including degree programs, internships, language training, cultural activities, joint conferences, workshops, exhibitions, advanced training courses, and student exchanges. Furthermore, grants aimed at training future specialists are often incorporated into contracts for joint projects, especially under BRI or under significant Chinese government investments in a certain country.

One of the latest public statements about China's interest in foreign students is the statement by Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, made at a press conference on April 29, 2022. Zhao Lijian was asked about the timing of the return of Indian students to China to continue their full-time studies after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic:

*Zhao Lijian: "I don't have an answer on the specific arrangement at the moment. We attach high importance to the issue of foreign students' return to China for their studies, including Indian students. These international students are envoys for friendly exchanges between China and their home countries. After completing their studies in China, they may return home and work as journalists or diplomats, even ambassadors to China. They represent the future of our relations".*

*"China always attaches great importance to and fully understands these students' ardent wish to resume their studies in China. We noted that some are on government scholarship. The Chinese government has provided financial support to them in the hope that once they complete their studies, they will act as a bridge of friendship between their countries and China and contribute to the development of bilateral ties." (Zhao, 2022, April 29)*

In recent years, China has successfully utilized education as a means of exercising “soft power”. The increasing number of universities attracting foreign students from around the world demonstrates a growing interest in China and a willingness to collaborate with the country. This strategic approach to education in China may contribute to the development of loyal groups abroad who hold a favorable view of the country in the future. As the “One Belt and One Road” initiative continues to be promoted, China is expected to engage an expanding number of students, further expanding its sphere of “soft” influence.

However, it is important to note that while the Chinese government aims to enhance its soft power through student attraction, most students are primarily driven by personal goals such as seeking a high-quality education at an affordable price and gaining valuable experience. This holds particularly true for degree-seeking students rather than those participating in short-term language courses or student exchanges. Consequently, their main interests differ from soft power objectives, and their satisfaction with China relies heavily on the fulfillment of their educational needs, especially among self-funded students. Therefore, prioritizing the provision of high-quality education is paramount when leveraging higher education as a tool for soft power. (Tian & Lowe, 2018)

#### **2.4 China’s Soft Power and Thailand**

The literature review indicates that the studies on China’s higher education policy in relation to soft power have not included the Southeast Asian region and Thailand in particular, except for the sporadic references to China’s educational presence through Confucius Institutes and scholarships. Similarly, the existing literature on the China-Thailand relationship does not exclusively deal with China’s higher education outreach in Thailand.

Kornphanat Tungkeunkunt’s article examines the growing presence of China on a global scale, with a particular focus on the context of Thailand. The researcher argues that the increasing Chinese influence in Thailand is largely driven by the historical background of Sino-Thai relations, Thailand’s economic interests, as well as the role of ethnic Chinese communities in Thailand. The contribution of the author

lies in exploring the implications of China's soft power diplomacy for Thailand in general, including investment in the development of Confucius Institutes and attracting Thai students to education in China. (Tungkeunkunt, 2016) Y. Zhou's working paper also examined a cultivation of soft power through Confucius institutions in the Sino-Thai relationship. (Zhou & Luk, 2016) While Krisanachinda Thanakrit in her dissertation mainly studied China's soft power diplomacy for Thailand. The specific forms of soft power diplomacy include political diplomacy, educational exchange, language promotion, cultural exchange, and foreign television broadcasting. The paper intended to study China's soft power diplomacy towards Thailand, with the purpose of understanding how China's soft power foreign policy plays a role in the 21st century and its impact on Thailand. (Thanakrit, 2018)

The China's government implements policies to exert greater control over its soft power initiatives, such as the Confucius Institutes and Chinese Cultural Centers. These programs are designed to promote Chinese language and culture and presently, 16 Confucius Institutes (CI) are located in Thai higher education institutions and 21 Confucius Classrooms (CC) operate in Thai schools. (Y Zhou, 2021) Scholarships are part of the CIs' appeal. Each year, a great number of Thai students apply for scholarships to the China Scholarship Council (CSC) via Thailand's CIs in order to study in China. (Tungkeunkunt, 2016)

There are limitations and wide time gaps in previous data on public opinion in Thailand. The survey by Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute for "The state of Southeast Asia 2023 survey report" only included a regular gauge of elite opinion on key regional and global issues. Due to, this survey focused mainly on geopolitical or regional issues and did not consider the opinions of Thai youth – international students. As a result, no surveys or studies specifically focused on Thai students studying in China were carried out recently. (Seah et al., 2021)

The literature on Thai students' overseas experiences is highly limited. Yi Lin and Worapinya Kingminghae's study was conducted in the context of Thai students' migration to China, from the perspective of factors influencing Thai international students' stay/leave intentions after completion of degrees in Chinese universities. (Lin & Kingminghae, 2017) Nattavud Pimpa undertook to explore the relationship between influencing factors from family on Thai students' choices of



international education. The study classifies choices of international education into the decision to study abroad, choice of country, city, academic program, and of university. (Pimpa, 2004) These studies are related more to identity and migration issues than Thai students' family influence or personal experiences in foreign countries. In fact, even the Thai government's records are glaringly blank on important aspects of information pertaining to Thai foreign students. As Bangkok Post writes: more than 30,000 Thai students are enrolled in study programs in China, making them the second-largest group of foreign students there, after South Koreans, however does not provide any further data. (Bangprapa & Tangsathaporn, 2021) Neither MoE (the Ministry of Education) nor the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) of China has done anything yet to compile details of the Thai students and their status in the foreign country. Thus, any information about the status of Thai students abroad is extremely difficult to find both in the vast Chinese media and official resources, and on Thai resources.

## **2.5 Research Gaps**

This thesis aims to explore the sources and practical effects of Chinese soft power in order to enhance understanding of China's soft power strategy towards foreign students - particularly Thai students - and contribute to filling gaps in the discourse on soft power. The work critically examines the limitations and prospects of the soft power concept by analyzing its reinterpretation by modern China. Through testing the proposed hypotheses, this thesis seeks to highlight both the shortcomings and perfections of the Chinese interpretation of soft power relative to its original Western formulation while also drawing attention to a previously neglected area of soft power through higher educational exchange in the Eastern world. China's "soft power" is regarded as a practically effective model capable of enhancing China's ability to achieve foreign policy objectives, improving its international image and fostering loyalty among foreign students who may become future elites in their respective countries.

Despite extensive research on China's soft power, critically important areas such as education continue to be overlooked and a methodology for assessing soft power in this domain has yet to be developed. However, it is important to note that the

concept of soft power itself is inherently vague. As such, it is not possible to definitively determine whether Chinese soft power has been successful based solely on descriptive or statistical method. In connection with mentioned conditions, the researcher of this work has the freedom of creativity in formulating a more innovative approach and method. While China still has much progress to make in increasing its global appeal - particularly in the West - it has been actively and effectively cultivating a positive image within Thailand. This is evidenced by the several tens of thousands of Thai students enrolled at China's universities. Thus, this area of research holds considerable promise despite being temporarily undervalued.

## **2.6 Theoretical Framework**

As noted earlier, higher education is a component of culture, politics and society values as a source of soft power. In this study, education is seen as a resource, as a channel or vehicle for promoting values, and as a tool for achieving political goals.

The Atkinson's research consistently shows that students who participate in study abroad programs rate their host country higher after they return. The Atkinson study has specifically linked educational exchange programs in the United States to the spread of U.S. soft power abroad, although it did not account for the length of stay of the participants. The findings of the study suggest that student exchange programs do have a positive effect on measures of international influence, particularly public opinion and foreign policy alignment. Atkinson argues that these findings have important implications for the use of soft power in international relations and for the design of public diplomacy programs. Atkinson's three contextual conditions are taken:

- (i) The depth and extent of social interactions that occur while abroad;
- (ii) The sharing of a sense of community or common identity between participants and their hosts;
- (iii) The attainment of a politically influential position by the exchange participant when they return home. (Atkinson, 2010)

Study abroad literature and Atkinson's contextual conditions allow me to identify several possible mechanisms that may account for the increase in soft power.

Because these mechanisms are intensified over time, in this research I expect that China's soft power towards Thai students will also increase over time.

Beth Anne Z. Zielinski discovered that studying abroad can be a transformative experience that allows individuals to immerse themselves in a new culture and gain new perspectives and skills. Cross-cultural adaptability, or the ability to successfully navigate and adapt to cultural differences, is an important aspect of this experience. Therefore, exploring how different factors, such as the duration of a study abroad program, can influence cross-cultural adaptability can be valuable for understanding how to optimize the study abroad experience. (Zielinski, 2007)

(1) Time, flexibility and openness —Beth Anne Z. Zielinski defines flexibility and openness as “the willingness to be receptive and enjoy the opportunity of being exposed to different ways of thinking and behavior of another culture” .She finds that students who studied abroad for longer periods of time exhibited greater flexibility and openness .The more flexible and open students are, the more receptive they should be to Chinese soft power.

Alike with Z. Zielinski, the article of M. Dwyer examines the impact of study abroad program and their durations on student outcomes, such as language proficiency, cultural understanding, and academic performance .The author argues that longer study abroad programs, typically those lasting a semester or academic year, provide students with more opportunities to immerse themselves in the host culture and develop a deeper understanding of the language, history, and social norms of the country .Dwyer reviews previous research on the topic, which generally supports the idea that longer study abroad programs have a greater impact on student learning outcomes .She also discusses the challenges of measuring the impact of study abroad programs, noting that there is often a selection bias in the types of students who choose to participate in longer programs. (Dwyer, 2004)

(2) More likely to be influenced by Chinese policies —As previously noted, Dwyer's research reveals that students who participated in a full-year study abroad program were more susceptible to acquiring an enhanced comprehension of their own cultural prejudices, cultivating a more refined global perspective, and experiencing a greater influence on their political and social viewpoints in comparison to those who solely engaged in a semester-long program .Consequently, it is anticipated

that Thai students who undertake a study abroad program in China will develop a more profound comprehension of China's domestic and foreign policies, which will ultimately contribute to the augmentation of China's soft power in the realms of government and foreign policy.

(3) More likely to develop personal relationships with Chinese people — Dwyer finds that students who studied abroad were twice as likely to cultivate lifelong friendships with host-country nationals .Developing close friendships will make an international student feel more personally attached to Chinese culture .This should lead to more warm feelings toward China in general, which inherently increases China's soft power .The student may also be more likely to discuss a variety of issues with Chinese nationals, which could increase their understanding of the reasoning behind China's policies.

(4) Greater understanding of Chinese language and culture —According to Lirong Ma, a scholar from China, the negative sentiment expressed by the Arab public towards China may be attributed to a deficiency in information and comprehension of cultural and political disparities .Ma's hypothesis posits that as Thai students residing in China acquire greater familiarity with the Chinese language, culture, society and values, their understanding of China's domestic and foreign policies is likely to improve .Consequently, it can be reasonably anticipated that with an increase in cultural awareness resulting from prolonged exposure to Chinese society, Thai students' attitudes towards China will become increasingly positive. (Ma, 2005)

## 2.7 Hypothesis

The author of this work puts forward the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** Thai students who participate in longer study programs in China will show greater flexibility and openness, which will make them more susceptible to Chinese soft power.

**Hypothesis 2:** Thai students participating in longer study programs in China will be more influenced by Chinese politics, culture, society which will lead to a deeper understanding of China's domestic and foreign policy, which will ultimately contribute to the strengthening of China's soft power.

**Hypothesis 3:** Thai students who have developed personal relationships with Chinese citizens during their studies are more likely to have a more positive attitude towards China and a better understanding of Chinese politics.

**Hypothesis 4:** Thai students in China who have mastered the Chinese language, understanding of culture, society and values during their studies will demonstrate a more positive attitude towards China, which will ultimately contribute to an increase in China's soft power.

## 2.8 Conceptual Framework

### Independent Variables

Duration variable - The length of Thai students' study programs in China serves as a critical factor in shaping their experiences and potentially influences their receptivity to China's soft power. Hypothesis 1 posits that Thai students' increased exposure to China inherent in longer programs will promote greater flexibility and openness toward Chinese culture and perspectives. It is assumed that this increased sensitivity makes students more susceptible to various new phenomena, one such phenomenon being China's soft power.

The duration variable also captures hypothesis 2, which suggests that extended immersion associated with longer programs promotes a deeper understanding of China's political, cultural, and social landscape. This increased knowledge is expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of China's domestic and foreign policies, potentially leading to more positive perceptions and ultimately strengthening China's soft power among students.

Personal relationships variable - The study emphasizes the importance of personal relationships formed between Thai students and Chinese citizens during their studies. Hypothesis 3 suggests that establishing these connections promotes positive social interaction and cultural exchange by allowing students to experience China beyond official narratives or stereotypes. These meaningful interactions are expected to foster more positive attitudes toward China and a better understanding of the prospects of China and its people, potentially contributing to a more favorable image of China and strengthening its soft power.

Chinese language, cultural and social knowledge variable - The level of knowledge Thai students acquire regarding Chinese language, culture, society and values plays an important role in shaping their perceptions. Hypothesis 4 proposes that mastering the Chinese language and gaining a deep understanding of Chinese culture and society provides students with the tools to navigate China's complexities and appreciate its unique aspects. This increased knowledge is expected to lead to more positive attitudes toward China, ultimately contributing to increased Chinese soft power through positive word of mouth and cultural acceptance.

The independent variables provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted factors shaping Thai students' experiences in China and their potential impact on China's soft power. The relationship between program length, personal connections, and level of knowledge acquired provides valuable insight into the complex dynamics at play in shaping perceptions and building influence.

#### **Dependent Variables**

Flexibility and openness - This variable reflects the extent to which Thai students show the willingness to adapt and accept Chinese culture, norms and perspectives. This includes their receptivity to new ideas and experiences related to China, potentially leading to a less superficial and more nuanced understanding of the country. The study suggests that longer program duration, positive personal relationships and greater knowledge contribute to greater flexibility and openness towards China. This variable interacts with the independent variable of duration and hypothesis 1.

Depth of influence - This variable refers to the extent to which China's soft power has influenced the perceptions and attitudes of Thai students. It reflects the level of positive influence China has on their views of its political, cultural and social acceptance. The framework suggests that longer program duration, positive personal relationships, and deeper knowledge contribute to the greater depth of Chinese soft power influence. This variable is correlated with independent variables of personal relationships and knowledge, as well as hypotheses 2, 3, and 4.

The conceptual framework suggests that program length, personal relationships, and knowledge (independent variables) influence students' flexibility and openness toward China, as well as the depth of influence of China's soft power on them

(dependent variables). Longer programs, positive relationships and deeper knowledge are expected to increase flexibility, openness and depth of receptivity to China's soft power.

### **Moderating Variables**

Although the conceptual framework mainly focuses on direct relationships between independent and dependent variables, it recognizes other variables, such as the potential influence of moderating variables. These factors, although not directly manipulated by the study, are supposed to influence the strength or direction of the hypothesized relationships.

**City development** - One of the most important regulatory variables is the level of development of the city in which Thai students reside during their studies. They are often classified by the Chinese Tier system, with higher tiers representing more developed cities with developed infrastructure, varied amenities and a wider range of cultural offerings. Within the framework of the concept, it is assumed that city development can both increase and decrease the influence of independent variables on dependent variables.

In higher-tier cities, students are likely to have more resources and opportunities, increasing the benefits of duration of study, quality of personal relationships, and knowledge acquisition.

**International student offices** - One limiting factor is the quality of services provided by universities' international student offices. These offices play a vital role in facilitating the transition of international students and improving their overall experience. The concept suggests that the effectiveness of these support systems may significantly influence the relationships between independent and dependent variables.

Responsive international student offices improve learning quality and integration, increasing program effectiveness for Thai students thus China's soft power perception. Weak support systems can hinder the positive impact of independent variables, leading to dissatisfaction and problems.

### **Mediating Variables**

Mediating variables intervene in the hypothesized relationships by partially explaining the mechanisms by which independent variables influence dependent variables.

Cultural Immersion - One of the most important mediating variables in this system is cultural immersion. This refers to the depth and intensity of students' acquaintance with Chinese culture, society, and norms during their studies. The concept suggests that independent variables influence dependent variables through cultural immersion.

The longer program promotes deeper cultural immersion by engaging students in cultural activities and interaction with local people, promoting flexibility and openness to Chinese culture. Deeper immersion enhances understanding of Chinese complexities, and positive personal relationships promote genuine cultural exchange beyond stereotypes. Meaningful interaction provides insight into Chinese customs, values and attitudes, promoting greater understanding and flexibility towards China.

Knowledge acquisition - This variable also plays a role in establishing the relationship between independent and dependent variables. By mastering the Chinese language and gaining a deeper understanding of Chinese culture and society, students acquire the tools and knowledge needed to navigate challenges and appreciate the unique aspects of China. This expanded knowledge base allows them to engage with the culture in more meaningful ways, facilitating deeper immersion and ultimately leading to greater flexibility and openness towards China.

Thus, cultural immersion and knowledge acquisition act as critical mediators in this system. Explaining the underlying mechanisms through which independent variables influence dependent variables, provides a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics shaping Thai students' experiences in China and their receptiveness to China's soft power.

### **Control Variables**

The control variables in this conceptual framework have the potential to significantly impact the dependent variable and, thus the research results. In the context of examining the dynamics of Thai students' experiences in China and their perceptions of Chinese soft power, several important control variables emerged:

Previous exposure - Prior familiarity with Chinese culture and language among Thai students by their enrollment at Chinese universities could significantly influence their receptiveness to cultural immersion, attitudes toward China, and overall perceptions of Chinese soft power. Controlling for variations in students' pre-existing

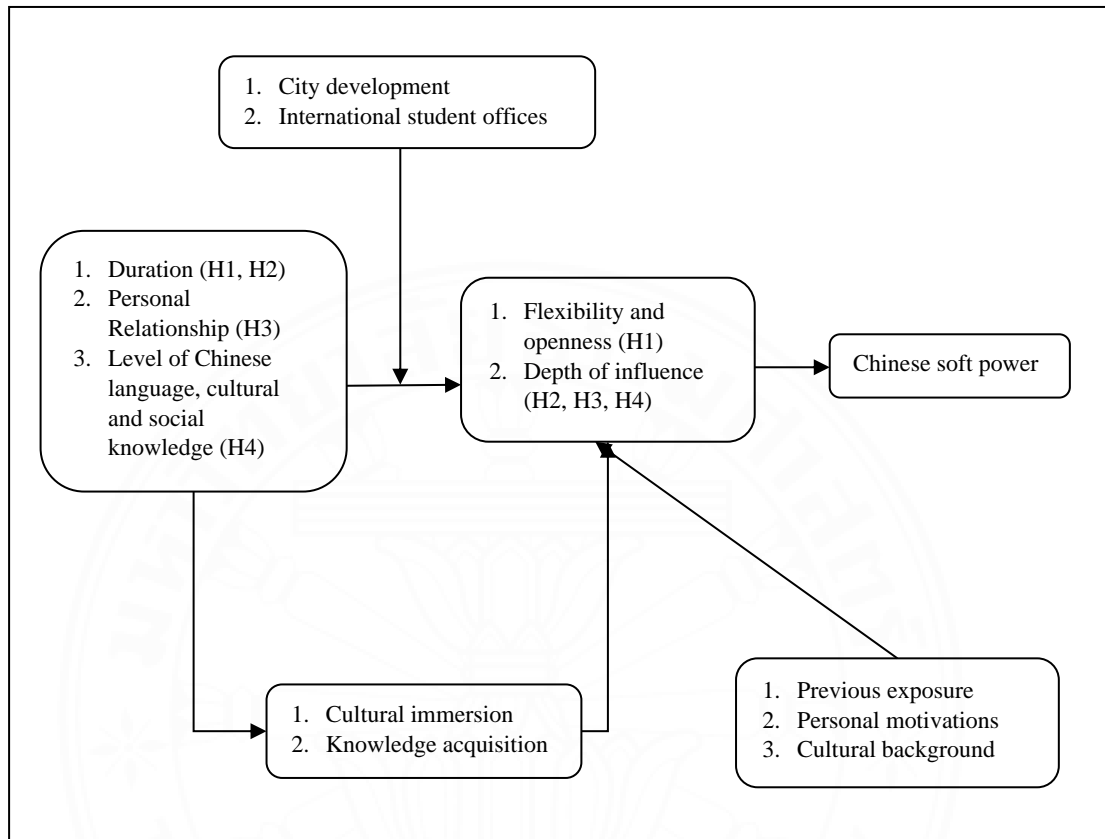


exposure to Chinese culture and language enables researchers to discern the unique impact of the study abroad experience.

Personal motivations - Thai students' diverse motivations for pursuing educational opportunities in China, ranging from academic interests to career aspirations to personal affiliations, represent a salient factor that may shape their experiences and perceptions during their tenure abroad. Controlling for variations in students' motivations facilitates the disentanglement of motivational influences from the effects attributable to the duration of study, interpersonal relationships, and knowledge acquisition.

Cultural background - The cultural backgrounds of Thai students, encompassing diverse linguistic, religious, ethnic and sociocultural affiliations, represent a crucial determinant of their interpretive frameworks, social interactions, and perceptions of cultural assimilation during their sojourn in China. Controlling for variations in cultural backgrounds enables researchers to disambiguate the effects of cultural heterogeneity from the focal variables under investigation, thereby enhancing the internal validity of the study.

By integrating these control variables into a methodological framework, this study increased the reliability and validity of its empirical analysis, producing robust, generalizable, and theoretically nuanced findings. It is worth emphasizing that the wide range and in-depth analysis of the introductory questions during the interview process shed light on all the above-mentioned variables, including control variables. Moreover, taking into account the complexities of the control variables ensured that the study's findings were placed within a comprehensive analytical framework that considered the multifaceted influences on Thai students' experiences and perceptions in China.

**Figure 2.1***Conceptual framework*

Source: Adapted from Atkinson, 2010; Dwyer, 2004; Ma, 2005; Zielinski, 2007

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The current chapter presents the methodological framework of the study, outlining the research approach, methods, and their interaction in the context of this research. Additionally, it provides the sampling criteria and development of interview questions. Finally, the last section provides interpretive paradigm, which explains the author's approach to interpreting research findings.

#### **3.1 Multi-Method Approach in Qualitative Research**

Multimethod approach has gained significant prominence and relevance within the fields of international relations and comparative politics. It has become a central approach utilized in dissertations, books, and even within the limitations of research articles. The prevalence of multimethod research demonstrates its widespread adoption and recognition as a valuable approach in these fields. (Goertz, 2016) Scholars advocating for the integration of different qualitative methods often highlight the benefits of such an approach, contending that it leads to a more comprehensive and robust research account. They argue that combining methods contributes to a "richer" understanding of the phenomenon, deepens comprehension, enhances the trustworthiness of findings, and promotes a more unbiased analysis. (Mik-Meyer, 2020)

Qualitative multi-method research does present a potential drawback in terms of the additional resources it requires, including time and available research funds. However, it is important to note that this is not always the case. Depending on the specific circumstances and research objectives, the utilization of multiple qualitative methods can be highly advantageous. By employing a multi-method approach, researchers have the opportunity to delve deeper into the complexity and meaning of the subject matter. This can lead to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding compared to a research design that relies solely on a single method. Therefore, while there may be resource implications, under appropriate conditions, the

integration of multiple qualitative methods can greatly enhance the researcher's comprehension of the topic at hand. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011)

Eugene Bardach emphasizes that in policy studies, the primary sources of information, data, and ideas can be divided into two main types: documents and people. (Bardach & Patashnik, 2019) In identifying suitable data for my own research, I have valued Dvora Yanow's advice, stating that reading papers can be a valuable component of both observational research and interview-based projects. Documents serve to provide background information before developing a research project, for example, before conducting an interview. In addition, they can either confirm or challenge observational and collected data through interview, providing the researcher with evidence that can clarify or challenge the assembled information. (Yanow, 2017)

The author's research employs a multi-method approach that combines qualitative methods within a single study, enabling a comprehensive examination of the research topic. The primary method of data collection is semi-structured interviews, which facilitate a detailed exploration of the experiences and perspectives of Thai students studying at Chinese universities. To bolster the research methodology and findings, a secondary research method of documentary analysis is employed. This involves systematically examining various types of documents, such as books, articles, news, and reports, to extract valuable insights.

Triangulation of multiple methods occurs when a researcher uses a variety of qualitative data collection procedures, including interviews, observations, and document analysis. This approach allows cross-checking and comparison of information obtained from different sources. (Denzin, 2009) As Merriam and Tisdell point out, data obtained from interviews can be confirmed by field observations or information found in documents, which increases the validity and reliability of research findings. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) Triangulating data can complement institutional analysis and increase the accuracy of the study's findings, enhancing the validity of the conclusions. (Decrop, 1999) Thus, my research involved the procedure of triangulation, which analyzed and examined the results obtained from different methods.

### **3.2 Primary Research Method – Semi-Structured Interview, Sampling, Interview Questions**

Qualitative research predominantly relies on interviewing as the primary method of data collection. According to Oakley, qualitative interviews serve as a framework that goes beyond mere documentation, allowing for the exploration, questioning, and reinforcement of practices and standards. (Oakley, 1998) Additionally Creswell stated that numerous qualitative methods have been developed to facilitate a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of various issues through the interpretation of textual data. The most prevalent types of qualitative methods include interviewing and observation. These methods enable researchers to delve deeply into the subject matter, gaining rich insights and interpretations. (Creswell & Poth, 2016)

Semi-structured interviews are the primary source of data for qualitative research projects and are usually prearranged at a specified time and place, separate from day-to-day events. (Adams et al., 2002) They are usually based on a set of pre-defined open-ended questions, and additional questions are raised during the dialogue between the interviewer and the respondent. Semi-structured in-depth interviews are the most common interview format in qualitative research and can be conducted with individuals or in groups. (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) Thus, it is important to recognize semi-structured interviews as the optimal data collection method in qualitative research. (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017)

The primary method used in this study, which involves a deeper level of interaction with participants through interviews, is well suited to the task at hand. Using semi-structured interviews, I will be able to collect primary data directly from Thai students, allowing for a comprehensive study of their experiences in China and their perceptions of Chinese socio-political values, culture, and higher education institutions/programs. This approach will provide valuable insights into the impact of China's higher education programs on Thai students and allows to compare primary data with secondary sources, thus addressing the first challenge of enhancing China's soft power in Thailand that is related with the first objective of this study.

Moreover, thanks to the in-depth interviews conducted as part of this work, the author will be able to identify the main shortcomings of China's soft power towards

Thailand through higher education exchange. This is consistent with the second objective of my work, as the participants will provide the author with first-hand accounts of their experiences, allowing for a critical examination of any potential shortcomings or challenges China faces in exercising its soft power through educational exchanges.

Finally, based on the data and conclusions obtained during the interview, the author will be able to formulate informed recommendations for the Chinese authorities. These recommendations will be aimed at improving China's "soft power" through the exchange of higher education in relation to Thailand, which will solve the third objective of the research.

When conducting interviews with an idiographic orientation, the goal is to have a sample size that would be enough for individual cases to be clearly represented in the study and for an in-depth analysis of each case. To solve this problem, researchers using IPA (Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis) are advised to target a range of 3 to 16 participants in a single study. The lower limit of this range is often recommended for bachelor's projects, and the upper limit is suitable for large-scale funded projects. (Mason, 2002; Trost, 1986) In accordance with these recommendations, the author of this study selected 21 Thai students selected under certain criteria as respondents. The interview process will take place approximately 4 weeks from the end of July to the end of August 2023, this time frame is preferred due to the summer holidays for students studying in China, which allows them to participate in the research.

IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experience, the meaning of experience to participants and how participants make sense of that experience. IPA is idiographic in its commitment to analyse each case in a corpus in detail. (Smith, 2011)

The author established 6 criteria for selecting interview participants:

In China, cities are often subdivided into different tiers based on various factors such as population size, economic development, infrastructure, and overall level of urbanization. The tier system is a way of classifying cities into different levels of importance and development. The tier system in Chinese cities can significantly impact the experience of international students based on their choice of study location. This, in turn, has potential implications for the effectiveness of Chinese soft power and its perception by foreign students.

Top-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou tend to host the bulk of the most prestigious universities with the highest quality of education in the country. On the other hand, lower-tier cities have significantly fewer world-renowned universities and limited educational resources, which can affect the overall quality of educational process and experience for international students.

Culturally, major metropolitan areas, usually located in higher-tier cities, are often more cosmopolitan and culturally diverse. These cities attract people from different walks of life, offering a rich multicultural environment that exposes international students to different perspectives and experiences. This cultural diversity can enhance students' global awareness and intercultural competence. In contrast, lower-tier cities may have more homogeneous populations and less diverse cultural environments, which may limit international students' exposure to different cultures and points of view.

Higher tier cities generally offer broader job and career prospects. These cities are often the economic and commercial centers of the country/province, attracting more earning opportunities. International students studying in these cities may be more likely to find internships, part-time jobs such as buying and shipping goods from China to own country or providing translation services for entrepreneurs from own country who came to China for buying goods, as well as job opportunities after graduation. Lower tier cities, although the cost of living tends to be lower, which may be more affordable for students. However, job prospects have a more limited range of industries and opportunities, what can affect the international students' impression of the host country.

1. To ensure that the impressions and experiences of Thai students in China are captured, the researcher has categorized the respondents into three groups, with five respondents in each group. The division of respondents is based on the Chinese city tier system, which provides insights into the varying characteristics of different cities. The researcher has chosen to focus on cities in Tier 1, New Tier 1 (Tier 2), and Tier 2 (3) as these cities attract the majority of international students and majority of universities that accept international students are located within these cities.

- Group A - consists of 7 students studying in First-Tier cities. These cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, hold significant national

importance in political, economic, and social activities, driving developmental influence.

- Group B – comprises 8 students studying in New Tier 1 (Tier 2 cities).

The specific list of New Tier 1 may undergo minor changes each year. Examples of these cities include Chengdu, Hangzhou, Chongqing, Wuhan, Xi'an, Suzhou, Tianjin, Nanjing, Changsha, Zhengzhou, Dongguan, Qingdao, Shenyang, Ningbo, and Kunming. Overall, there are 15 cities considered as New Tier 1 cities in China. These cities are characterized by their significant economic development and well-established infrastructure. (ChinaDaily, 2021; Yi, Li, & Zhang, 2021)

- Group C - consists of 6 students studying in Tier 2 cities (factually the third class of cities). These cities, totaling 30, are often major counties or located on the east coast. Examples include Xiamen, Fuzhou, Wuxi, Nantong, Haikou, Harbin, Jinan, Changchun, Wenzhou, Shijiazhuang, and Nanning. They are not as growing and prosperous as the New First-Tier cities. (Slater, 2018)

**Table 3.1**

*China's City-Tier Classification*

City-tier classification	Tier 1	New Tier 1 (Tier 2)	Tier 2 (Tier 3)	Tier 3 (Tier 4)
GDP	Over USD 300 billion	USD 68-USD 299 billion	USD 18-USD 67 billion	Bellow USD 17 billion
Political administration of the city	Directly-controlled municipalities, and leading provincial capital cities	Directly-controlled municipalities, provincial capital cities and economically important cities	Provincial capital cities and prefecture-level cities	Prefecture-level cities and country-level cities
Population	Over 15 million people	Between 3 to 15 million people	Between 150.000 to 3 million people	Less than 150.000 people
Samples	Beijing Shanghai Shenzhen Guangzhou	Dalian, Ningbo, Dongguan, Nanjing, Suzhou, Tianjin, Wuhan, Qingdao, Chengdu, Chongqing, Xi'an, Hangzhou, Changsha, Zhengzhou, Shenyang, Nanning, Xiamen, Fuzhou Kunming, etc.	Taizhou, Xuzhou, Haikou, Wuxi, Harbin, Jinan, Nantong, Jinhua, Lanzhou, Shijiazhuang, Wenzhou, Changchun, Foshan, Jinan, Shaoxing, Changzhou, Huizhou, Ürümqi, Hefei, Nanchang, Haikou, Zhuhai, etc.	Baoding, Luzhou, Zhanjiang, Zibo, Dandong, Putian, Handan, Yingkou, Meizhou, etc.

Source: SCMP, 2016; Wong, 2019



2. Only students pursuing an academic degree (Bachelor's, Master's, or Ph.D.) are eligible to participate in the interviews. This criterion is chosen to ensure that the participants have consciously chosen to study in China and had an understanding of the mandatory duration of their residence in China as part of their academic program, as well as it ensures a deeper engagement with the host country's educational/social environment. Such criterion excludes students of language courses who may not have made their choice consciously or have not determined their intention for pursuing an academic degree in China and short-term exchange programs that are not the focus of this study.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experience, students are required to have lived in China for a minimum of one year, equivalent to at least two academic semesters. This criterion allows for a clearer interpretation of the data, allowing students to fully immerse themselves in Chinese culture, lifestyle and education system. By excluding students with shorter stays, the study can avoid collecting primary experiences that may not accurately reflect the participants' overall experience. This criterion acknowledges the importance of forming social connections, adapting to life in the country, establishing personal habits, and experiencing various aspects of education and life that are developed over an extended period of time, at least a year.

Awareness of soft power, participants should understand or be aware of the concept of soft power and its role in international relations. This knowledge enables more insightful and meaningful discussions concerning their experiences and perceptions of China's influence through educational exchanges. Additionally, it encourages participants to share unique moments or experience related to soft power that they may have encountered during their study in China. The author will provide an advance explanation of the concept of soft power, including examples, to participants who are unfamiliar with it. This ensures that participants have a clear understanding of the concept before the interview takes place.

To better examine hypothesis 3 regarding Thai students' relationship with Chinese citizens, this criterion requires Thai students to engage in personal relationships with Chinese citizens during their studies. The author will specifically

interview Thai students who have actively interacted with Chinese society and established personal relationships with Chinese citizens.

In order to examine the potential influence of gender on the participants' views and responses, the diversity criterion requires an equal representation of both male and female participants. This criterion aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how China's soft power affects different gender groups. The hypothesis suggests that the gender of the student may play a role in shaping their perspectives. By including this criterion, the research can gain a broader and more balanced perspective, enabling a deeper analysis of the resonance of China's soft power with each gender group. The author will intend to equalize gender balance in each previously mentioned group A, B, and C from the first criterion.

Concerning Interview questions, the questions will be posed during the interviews focused on the academic, social, cultural and personal experiences of Thai students studying in China, as well as their political views.

The process of forming interview questions began with reference to existing literature such as Siqu Gao's and Romi Jain's, but in the process of adapting questions to personal research, they were partially reformatted to the theoretical basis and relevance of the research author's focus. (Gao, 2015; Jain, 2018) The questions were developed taking into account the soft power model of education, the theoretical framework and hypotheses with all its components: education as a mechanism for introducing students to Chinese values/culture, student hosting, education as a resource for China's efforts to attract Thai students, and education as a tool for China to achieve specific goals, such as expanding its global influence through image-building and networking, in this study, in Thailand in particular.

The developed questions are formed in such a way as to confirm the theoretical basis and hypotheses or refute them. The author formulated and evenly distributed all questions from five dimensions (*China's overall image, foreign and domestic policy, development model, education and Sino-Thai relationship*) in all sections of questions.

The soft power model's resource component explored the academic experiences of Thai students who are currently studying or have recently graduated from Chinese universities. Education is viewed as a valuable resource in shaping a

country's image or appeal in the global arena. Meanwhile, the tool component of the model involves leveraging higher education to accomplish specific policy objectives. This research focuses on China's foreign policy objectives related to Thailand.

To answer research questions, the researcher formulated these questions for the interviewed students:

(1) How does China's higher educational programs influence Thai students in enhancing China's soft power in Thailand?

#### 1.1 Introductory questions:

1. How long have you been studying in China (in total)?
2. What academic degree are you currently pursuing ? (If this isn't your first degree in China, could you please mention your previous one ?)
3. Which university are you enrolled in?
4. What is your major?
5. What stimulated you to study in China?
6. How did you hear/know about the opportunity to study in China?
7. What was your knowledge of the Chinese language, culture, society before you started your studies?
8. Have you ever studied at the Confucius Institute in Thailand?
9. What was your impression/feelings of China before you started your degree?
10. Have you ever received a scholarship/funding from China's government/University/ Confucius Institute?

1.1.1 How does the duration of studying in China influence the views of Thai students regarding domestic policy and development model of China?

1.1.2 How does the duration of studying in China influence the views of Thai students regarding foreign policy of China?

1. Has your opinion changed compared to the previous one after certain time in China?
2. What reasons changed your impression of China?

3. What is your current impression of China's development model and policy (domestic/foreign)?
4. How do you assess the role of China in the development of the region or the world?
5. Do you think that China is or should be the world's leading power?

1.1.3 How do knowledge of the language, culture and society of China affect the consent and support of China's policy and development model by Thai students?

1. Has knowledge of the Chinese language, culture, society influenced your worldview and understanding of China ?
2. Has a deeper knowledge of the Chinese language, culture, values and society influenced your opinion about China ?
3. Has a deeper knowledge of the Chinese language, culture, values and society influenced your understanding of China's policy and development model?
4. Do you think that the opinion about China can be erroneous / incorrect due to lack of knowledge about the language, culture, values, society of China?
5. Do you think that you used to understand China less or misunderstood it because you did not know Chinese language, society or culture before?
6. Do you think that after mastering the language, culture, values, society of China, you can understand better the Chinese development model and policy?

1.2 How does developing personal relationships with Chinese citizens during Thai students' studies affect the worldview of Thai students?

1. Has your worldview/thinking changed after communicating with your Chinese friends/people?
2. Has your interaction with Chinese friends/people affected your opinion of China?

3. Do you think that you used to understand China less or wrong because you didn't communicate with Chinese friends/people and couldn't discuss some issues with them?
4. Do you feel that your Chinese friends/people have somehow improved your understanding and opinion of China?

1.3 How do Thai students' personal development and growth get influenced by receiving education in China?

1. How has your education in China affected your personal development?
2. Have your university, society, friends in China influenced your personal growth?
3. Assess the role of your education in China on personal development, future plans, career, etc.?
4. Are you considering your career or continuing your studies in China or prefer another country?

1.4 How does receiving education in China affect Thai students' perceptions of the relationship between China and Thailand?

1. How do you perceive China's relations with Thailand?
2. Has your opinion about the relationship between China and Thailand changed after studying in China? (For example, it got better, worse, didn't change)
3. Do you think receiving an education in China, helps the development of Thai-Chinese relations? In what way?
4. Do you think getting an education in China influenced your opinion on the relationship between China and Thailand? In what way?

(2) What are the primary drawbacks of utilizing Chinese soft power via higher education exchange programs for Thai students?

1. How do you rate teaching at your university?
2. How do you evaluate the work of the office of international students at your university?
3. What obstacles did you face while studying in China?

4. What obstacles did you face while living in China?
  5. What are the shortcomings of your education or life in China that can be improved?
- (3) What recommendations can be formulated for the Chinese authorities to enhance their soft power through higher education exchange in relation to Thailand?
1. How do you think to improve the life and study of Thai students in China and make education in China more attractive to Thais?
  2. Do you have any comments, additions and wishes related to previous questions?

### **3.3 Secondary Research Method – Documentary Analysis**

In addition to the primary method of conducting semi-structured interviews, document analysis was employed as a supplementary method for data collection and analysis. Recognizing that interviews solely may not provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic, the documentary method was conducted simultaneously with the interviews. This parallel use of both methods facilitated the systematic organization and coordination of the research process, spanning from the formulation of the methodology to the examination and discussion of the collected data derived from the interviews. It should be noted that the author of the study does not separate the primary and secondary methods but conducts them in parallel. Side by side analysis contributes to greater elaboration and objectivity of the results, thus the two methods are integrated into each other and complement each other in addressing research objectives.

At a general level, most researchers in qualitative research probably conduct primary documentary research at a certain time. Many projects start with an analysis of the political context and justification, possibly using key reports from the national government or international agencies. However, there are several reasons to consider documents as an influential data source. Like focus groups and interviews, textual discourses can provide insight into how people construct reality and understand the world. Sometimes there are special reasons for preferring a documentary approach, for example, learning the “official” language used by bureaucrats and politicians.

(Gorsky & Mold, 2020) Document analysis is a recognized and valuable research method that has been used for many years. It includes a systematic analysis of various types of documents, including books, newspaper articles, articles in academic journals and institutional reports. With this method, any document containing text can potentially be used as a valuable source for qualitative analysis. (Patton, 2014)

Document analysis is a systematic approach used to review and evaluate various types of documents, including both printed and electronic materials, such as computer content and content transmitted over the Internet. Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis involves the study and interpretation of data to extract meaning, improve understanding and gain empirical knowledge. (Rapley, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 1998)

According to Norman Denzin, document analysis is frequently used along with other qualitative research methods as a means of triangulation. Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methodologies to study the same phenomenon. (Norman K. Denzin, 2009) Yin Robert advocates that in qualitative research, researchers are encouraged to draw on at least two data sources, aiming for convergence and validation through the use of different data sources and methods. In addition to documents, other sources of evidence may include interviews, observation with or without participation, and physical artifacts. (Yin, 1994)

Triangulation of data in research is aimed at increasing reliability by establishing a body of evidence. (Eisner, 1991) By examining information gathered using multiple methods, researchers can confirm conclusions from different data sets, mitigating the impact of potential biases inherent in a single study. Glenn Bowen supports the idea that pre-existing data is usually combined with other types of data for triangulation, a strategy aimed at increasing the validity of the study. Triangulation helps to assess the consistency of the results and gain a deeper understanding of the topic under study. In addition to analyzing existing documents, researchers can include data from interviews and observations. By using different methods to collect information, researchers can test their findings on multiple datasets, thereby reducing the likelihood of bias. (Bowen, 2009) According to Patton, triangulation helps protect researchers from criticism that their results are solely the product of a single method, source, or researcher bias. (Patton, 1990) Document analysis, as a research method, is

particularly suitable for qualitative case studies that involve in-depth study and provide detailed descriptions of a specific phenomenon, event, organization or program. (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994)

The analysis of documents, such as books and journal articles, provides clear advantages due to the stability of the data they provide. Unlike interviews or observations, document analysis does not depend on the researcher's interaction or bias. While interviews and observations have limitations in providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study, the documents offer a more reliable and complete representation. (Bailey, 2018) Novice researchers may find document analysis more appropriate, as it requires less effort before the data analysis stage. Field research involving interviews and observations requires physical presence, permission, and transcription. However, when analyzing existing texts, such steps are often not necessary, although transcription may still be required for audiovisual sources used in the analysis of documents. Therefore, the use of documents may be a more convenient option, especially for novice researchers, because of their stability and reduction of preparatory work. (Braun et al., 2016; Creswell & Báez, 2020)

### **3.4 Interpretive Paradigm**

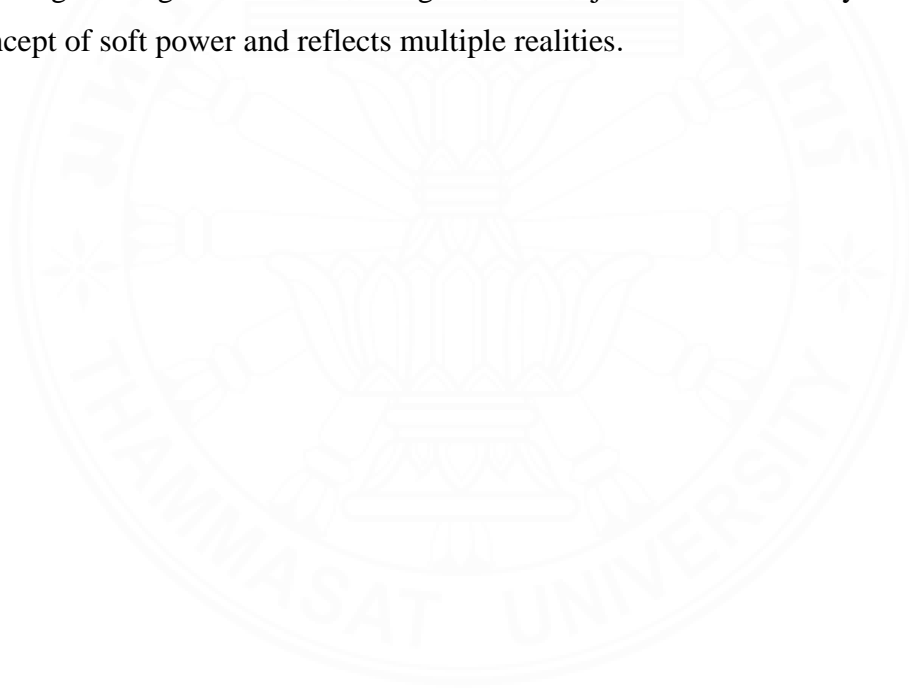
My research was informed by the social constructivism paradigm. As articulated by Creswell, the interpretation of a situation, phenomenon or event is constructed through subjective experiences. This study involved an examination of Thai students' experiences within China's higher education programs and an exploration of the relationship between these experiences and China's soft power policy objectives in Thailand. For instance, the Chinese Ministry of Education's website prominently promotes its education system to foreign students, institutions and governments, reflecting the government's emphasis on international cooperation and exchange. (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

According to Creswell, constructivist researchers acknowledge that their personal backgrounds shape their interpretations and actively situate themselves within the research to recognize how their interpretations are influenced by their personal, cultural and historical experiences. As such, the researchers' findings are subject to



interpretation that is informed by their own experiences and backgrounds. (Creswell & Poth, 2016) This aspect is of great importance, especially in the field of qualitative research, which embraces the constructivist understanding of knowledge. This approach emphasizes that researchers must rely on the perspectives and perspectives of the participants involved in the study to gain insight into a given situation. (Creswell, 2009)

The constructivist paradigm is evident in my interpretation of data through the analytical lens shaped by my academic background in international politics and my Central Asian heritage. This paradigm incorporates student experiences and document analysis obtained from interviews and documents. Additionally, the process of meaning-making and understanding of the subject is informed by the theoretical concept of soft power and reflects multiple realities.



## CHAPTER 4

### INTERVIEW DISCUSSION

This section of the study involves an in-depth analysis of interviews and subsequent comparative analysis of empirical data with documentary sources. Its main goal is to provide comprehensive coverage of the practical application of Chinese soft power and its perception by Thai international students. To achieve this goal, the section is divided into several subsections, each of which serves the purpose of a thorough and extensive examination of the projection and perception of China's soft power. The ultimate goal is to answer research questions through a holistic and comparative assessment of research findings.

**Table 4.1**

*Information table of the respondents from Tier 1 cities*

Tier 1				
Respondents	Time in China	University Location	Major	Degree
1. Respondent E	1 year	Beijing	Engineering	Bachelor's
2. Respondent G	4 years	Shanghai	Teaching	Master's
3. Respondent I	4 years	Shanghai	China Studies	Bachelor's
4. Respondent L	6 years	Shanghai	Journalism and Communication	Master's
5. Respondent M	2 years	Guangzhou	Teaching	Bachelor's
6. Respondent Q	4 years	Shanghai	Teaching	Master's
7. Respondent T	1 years	Beijing	Engineering	Bachelors

**Table 4.2***Information table of the respondents from Tier 2 cities*

<b>Tier 2</b>				
<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Time in China</b>	<b>University Location</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Degree</b>
1. Respondent C	6 years	Nanning	Medicine	Bachelor's
2. Respondent F	3 years	Changsha	Food Science and Engineering	Bachelor's
3. Respondent H	4 years	Chongqing	Teaching	Bachelor's
4. Respondent J	3 years	Zhengzhou	Medicine	Bachelor's
5. Respondent N	4 years	Nanjing	Translation	Master's
6. Respondent O	3.5 years	Tianjin	Teaching	Bachelor's
7. Respondent P	4 years	Zhengzhou	Engineering	Master's
8. Respondent S	6 years	Wuhan	Medicine	Bachelor's

**Table 4.3***Information table of the respondents from Tier 3 cities*

<b>Tier 3</b>				
<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Time in China</b>	<b>University Location</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Degree</b>
1. Respondent A	4 years	Wuxi	Business Administration	Bachelor's
2. Respondent B	5 years	Changzhou	Translation	Master's
3. Respondent D	2 years	Lanzhou	International Trade	Bachelor's
4. Respondent K	1 year	Haikou	Teaching	Bachelor's
5. Respondent R	3 years	Kaifeng	Teaching	Bachelor's
6. Respondent U	1 year	Haikou	Computer Science and Technology	Bachelor's

## 4.1 Inductive Approach

I used an inductive approach to analyze my interviews while systematizing them. The inductive approach provides a systematic process of qualitative data research, taking into account the defined research objectives. Thus, the basic challenge of the inductive approach is to allow research results to naturally transform from raw data, taking into account the topics mentioned, compelling or important, without the limitations of structured methodologies associated with deductive data analysis, such as those used in experimental or hypothetical studies. (Thomas, 2003)

The method of inductive coding in interviews is based on data and provides the researcher with a systematic way to research their data and obtain the most relevant ideas and conclusions. This approach has been particularly successful in qualitative research, with the task of studying complex phenomena as well as providing a better understanding of the participants' experiences, in my case, interviews with Thai students. Inductive approaches are recognized to facilitate understanding of the intrinsic nature of complex data on the tools for developing aggregated topics or categories directly from raw data. (L. Liu, 2016)

The main stages of inductive coding begin with a careful study of the texts, taking into account the different meanings and viewpoints they carry. Researchers then identify text segments containing important elements and assign them new categories. In case the researcher needs additional text segments in existing categories. The researcher can also develop an initial description of the meaning of the category and make appropriate notes detailing associations, connections, and consequences. These categories can be linked in different ways, forming networks, hierarchical structures, or causal relationships. (Thomas, 2003)

When presenting the results of inductive analysis, top-level categories are often used as major headings and individual categories serve as subheadings. It is considered appropriate practice to include in the text appropriate quotations from the respondent's direct presentation. A few examples are usually given, showing how they are identified, described, and accompanied by detailed descriptions and references to certain respondents' answers.

The systematic organization and analysis of these interviews is a crucial aspect of the inductive approach. The researcher appealing to this method is recommended to repeatedly analyze and improve his codes, thus identifying the patterns, themes, and concepts inherent in the source data. The obvious advantages are an abundant and in-depth understanding of the experiences and views of the participants in the study with their inner details.

My work prioritizes ensuring the credibility and validity of qualitative results. David R. Thomas identifies strategies to improve the reliability of quality research, including the reliability of intercoder/codification, detailed documentation, and participant verification. These methods facilitate rigorous research and verification of findings. (Thomas, 2003)

To sum up, qualitative research frequently involves a combination of inductive and deductive elements. In this case, it is worth considering the usefulness of hybrid approaches combining data-based analysis and theory-based analysis. This combination tends to emphasize the flexibility and adaptability of the inductive approach in the broader context of qualitative research. (Azungah, 2018)

## **4.2 Introductory Questions**

In the initial stage of the interview, participants were asked introductory questions about their academic journey, including details about their educational program, the duration of their stay in China on the interview day, their chosen institution of study, the motivating factors behind selecting China as their educational destination, the information channels they used to explore educational opportunities for studying in China, their initial perceptions of the country prior to commencing their educational journey, as well as questions about their potential involvement with Confucius Institutes in Thailand and whether they received scholarships for their studies.

In terms of what motivates respondents to seek education in China, the study's author has identified several dominant factors that act as the primary catalysts for choosing China as their educational destination. These motivating elements necessitate a comprehensive investigation, including comparative analyses with

existing research. In this section of my interview discussion, I will thoroughly delve into the initial findings of my research. These findings encompass not only the general characteristics of Thai students who lean towards studying in China but also specific strategies employed to enhance Chinese soft power. It's important to note that these strategies have the potential to influence not only Thai students who favor Chinese universities but also a broader range of individuals within Thailand's context.

**Table 4.4**

*Respondents' incentives for studying in China*

<b>Incentives</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Cultural aspect: Chinese culture, traditions, history	Q, M, J, N, O, F, S, A, R, J
Chinese language and its importance	G, L, H, S, C, A, D, U
China's development and its prosperity	I, E, T, M, O, P, R
Desire to be exposed to a foreign life	E, G, O, C, A, B
Chinese media content: TV series/shows and Chinese celebrities	Q, M, N, U, K
Quality of China's education and career perspectives upon graduation	E, I, T, P
Good scholarship	B, L
Sino-Thai relationships	L
Family Chinese heritage	J

These incentives were indicated in a scattered manner and were not hierarchically determined by respondents. It is worth saying that almost all students identified 2 or more motives that prompted them to choose China as their country for study.

#### **4.2.1 Discovering Cultural Aspect**

Before evaluating culture's role as a tool of China's soft power, it is essential to establish a clear definition of China's cultural influence and subsequently examine how it shapes the decisions of individuals who select China as their educational destination under the influence of Chinese culture.

Currently, there are not many studies on the constituent elements of a cultural soft power. Among the existing results, the understanding of scientists also varies greatly. Joseph Nye did not conduct a specific analysis of the elements of a cultural soft power. His representative work “soft power” discusses one of the resources of soft power - Culture, so it can be concluded that he believes that culture is an inclusive component, soft power includes high culture and mass culture, cultural contacts (such as academic, scientific and educational exchanges), especially popular culture. (J. S. Nye, 1990)

It is worth to revise the earlier reference to Wang Huning, who is regarded as the founder of Chinese soft power. As a result, Wang’s prominent work emphasizes culture as the primary foundation of a nation’s soft power, asserting that, “If a country has an admirable culture and ideological system, other countries will strive to follow it”. (H. Wang, 1993b)

Most researchers consider the traditional culture and ancient history of China as the most valuable source of soft power, which is aimed not only at attracting residents of East Asian countries sharing Confucian heritage but also the international community as a whole. (Yugang, 2007)

According to Wu and the existing scientific literature defining how soft power should be defined in the Chinese frames, it can be determined that culture is the basis of Chinese soft power, among which traditional Chinese culture is the most valuable source. (Y. Wu, 2018)

Traditional Chinese culture attaches great importance to moralism and humanism, emphasizing principles such as “winning respect through virtue” and “prioritizing people”. These values, deeply rooted in the traditional Chinese philosophies of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and other classics, find their final expression in the concept of “harmony”. (Mingjiang, 2008) The Golden Mean idea appeared in Greek thought and became a deep philosophical tradition in Chinese thought and the art of government, which values the importance of balance, illustrating the inclusiveness inherent in Chinese cultural soft power. This concept can be considered as important as democracy in Western countries. (Chen, 2009)

The belief that people should adhere to established social norms and traditions is another important concept in traditional Chinese culture. This commitment

to the principle of decency is deeply rooted in Confucianism, the basic value system of Chinese culture. This emphasis on moral and ethical behavior helps to clarify China's historical preference for soft power over hard power as a means of influence and diplomacy. (Y. Wu, 2018)

*Thus, 9 respondents cited interest in learning about Chinese culture, traditions, and history as their motivation for studying in China. (Q, M, J, N, O, F, S, A, R)*

For example, Student F shared her experiences and impressions of a short-term summer program in China that she had participated in during her high school years. According to her, she had studied Chinese for some time, but she fully realized that she wanted to get an education in China after the summer camp, so she described her experience "Participating in the camp made me realize that China is a very interesting country. In terms of people, language, culture, history, and food. It made me decide to study for a Bachelor's degree in China."

The Q student had the opportunity to visit China several times before starting her studies, but the decisive impression that prompted her to choose a Chinese university was her experience in the summer camp in China. She described her experience, "At that time, I came to attend the summer camp, and one of the main factors that attracted me to learn Chinese were Chinese culture, Chinese attractions, and the Chinese entertainment industry. In terms of Chinese culture, when I came to the summer camp, I would study Chinese in the morning and culture in the afternoon. At that time, the cultural classes were quite attractive to me. I really enjoyed Chinese painting and calligraphy. In terms of tourist attractions in China, due to its large size, there are many tourist attractions, and they are all very beautiful. Each place will have its own local characteristics and culture. I was impressed as much as I thought, 'In the future, I will definitely study Chinese well and play all over China.'"

In this analysis, it is worth considering separately Chinese short-term programs, such as summer camps for schoolchildren and students in China. Here some respondents who had the opportunity to participate in such programs, by sharing their experiences, often put the experience gained in these programs as crucial in the decision-making process for studying in China. For example, student N chose her main motivation to study in China deep interest in Chinese media content and the desire to



consume it without subtitles in the original language. However, her participation in a short-term program played a pivotal role in shaping her decision. After the program, she not only remained interested in Chinese audiovisual entertainment content but also developed a keen interest in Chinese culture, lifestyle, and society, which significantly influenced her choice to pursue her education in China. Student N shared “My initial interest, as I said, came from watching Chinese movies and series and wanting to be able to watch them without subtitles, and I never thought that I would study at a Chinese university. Later, when I was in high school, I went to study in the summer in China for fifty days, so I learned the language, culture, lifestyle, society, and other things that couldn't be learned from books or from various news screens. It made me impressed with many things that are Chinese. So I thought I would like to continue my studies and study more culture and lifestyle in China”.

It should be noted that in almost all cases, the interest in Chinese culture does not go against the interest in Chinese language, media content, or anything else. It can be observed that the majority of respondents referred to their interest in the cultural aspect as a complement to some of the other components that influenced their choice, rather than the individual one.

For example, students S and A, in addition to their interest in Chinese as a stimulus, incorporated a cultural aspect. Student A “I had been learning Chinese when I was in high school that reason why I study there (in China), is because I want to improve my Chinese skills and also learn a new culture and new life”. Likewise, student M motivated by studying Chinese to become a translator for Chinese celebrities also added culture to one of her incentives. Student M said, “My goal is to be an interpreter for Chinese stars. I am also interested in Chinese language and culture”. Another interesting example is student J seeking knowledge of culture, history, and traditions due to her desire to be more aware of her family's Chinese identity Student J expressed “I am so fascinated about Chinese dynasty history and my family has Chinese ancestors so I want to be more familiar with my family origin”. Students O and R single out as one of their motives the modern level of prosperity and development of China has made the desire for knowledge and cultural component of the country respectively. Student R stated that China's development and opportunities, made her want to develop in China along with its traditional culture.

#### **4.2.2 The Role of Short-Term Cultural-Language Programs – Summer Camps**

As we know, public diplomacy and soft power are interconnected concepts, closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing within the realm of international relations and state foreign policy. To comprehensively examine my interviews with respondents, it is essential to assess various Chinese public diplomacy practices that can impact the decision-making process of respondents at specific stages. In this context, I intend to explore and evaluate one of China's soft power approaches and its complexity concerning Thai students within the framework of my research. Additionally, I aim to analyze the factors contributing to the primary motivation for studying in China and the perceptions of China among some of my respondents.

The classic definition of public diplomacy proposed by E. Gallion emphasized the use of various means to change the views and beliefs of other peoples and governments. This change must occur in a way that influences their foreign policy decisions. (Cull, 2008) However, along with this definition, there are other interpretations. For example, US diplomat Hans Tuch viewed public diplomacy as a form of government communication with foreign audiences. This communication is aimed at enabling the foreign public to better understand the ideas and ideals of the country. In addition, according to Hans, it is important to present information about the culture and national goals of the country to foreign countries. (Hans, 1990) Leeds University professor Philip Taylor, in turn, sees public diplomacy as an action aimed at maintaining relationships for the long term and protecting foreign policy interests. He also believes that such diplomacy should contribute to a better understanding of foreign countries about the values and structure of their state. (Snow & Cull, 2020)

The scope of public diplomacy is extremely broad and covers many areas, with cultural engagement often taking precedence over the rest. The practice of cultural diplomacy entails various activities such as exhibitions, scholarships, exchanges, and other initiatives related to culture and people-to-people exchange. In the field of public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy initiatives are aimed at attracting the general public of the country of the subject of this diplomacy, and on the opposite side, the foreign public, which in this case is the object of public diplomacy. In our case, China's government via its Confucius Institutes or other organizations provides

teenagers and students from Thailand the opportunity to participate in short-term cultural courses in China. Usually, such programs are held in summer and, therefore, are named Summer Camp programs. Such programs introduce Chinese culture directly in China and give an opportunity to participants to enjoy Chinese culture and meet Chinese people.

From my interviews with respondents Q, F, and N, I discovered a certain pattern in the decision triggers for further rapprochement with Chinese culture and society. The above-mentioned respondents spoke extremely positively about their time spent in China, citing as the main advantages of their short-term program the vivid impressions of communicating with local residents and teachers, as well as a rich cultural and entertainment program from calligraphy lessons to degustation of various Chinese cuisines. Student F mentioned that she had been impressed in China since that summer camp and noted that it had made her realize that Chinese people were very kind and friendly, adding that when they knew she was a foreigner, they became very excited and welcomed her warmly.

It should be taken into account that the number of programs sponsored by the Chinese government or Chinese state-owned organizations, specifically indicates the effectiveness of short-term cultural exchanges provided to Thai youth by China. It is worth noting that these programs almost always take place under the patronage of large country universities that have a methodological and practical base for working with foreign students, as well as such programs take place in the most developed cities of China, such as Shanghai, Beijing, Nanjing, and Guangzhou. In such a manner, Thai youth have the opportunity to see China's economic progress, technological advances, experience highly qualified teaching staff, and discover cultural components in the historical centers of Chinese civilization in the most favorable light.

One of the latest examples is the hosting of the Thai-Chinese Youth Root-seeking Summer Camp, which took place at Huaqiao University (Xiamen). This camp was organized by a number of organizations of returned overseas Chinese, Huaqiao University, and the Chinese Teachers (Thailand) Association. During this cultural journey, twenty-two young Overseas Chinese participants from Thailand engaged themselves in a 10-day program. During this program, Thai students were

immersed in various aspects of Chinese culture. They studied Chinese language, craftwork, Chinese martial arts, and participated in master classes in Chinese poetry and dance. Students also had the opportunity to visit Fuzhou on the Hexie (Harmony) high-speed train. The students were shown a number of attractions and demonstrated the development of the city. At the end of the program, students expressed deep gratitude for the opportunity to broaden their vision, acquire first-hand knowledge of Chinese culture, language, and history, additionally, they emphasized the profound friendship between China and Thailand. (Linying, 2023)

Another example is a summer camp in Beijing organized by state-owned multinational conglomerate Sinochem Holdings, for children of company employees from a number of countries including Thailand. (Nan, 2023) Numerous short-term cultural programs such as summer camps are organized for foreign youth of Chinese ancestry. A recent example, the summer camp for foreign teenagers of Chinese ancestry was held in Beijing, and more than 100 teenagers from 20 countries were invited with the goal of a deeper understanding of the charm of Chinese civilization. (Zhong Wenxing, 2023)

In accordance with my analysis, the findings suggest that short-term cultural programs for teenagers or short-term student exchanges have a highly positive impact on Chinese public diplomacy toward Thai society and, as a result, increase China's soft power. Discovering the interviews with respondents and investigating documentation, it can be verified that summer programs can change and strengthen the positive image of China in the minds of Thai youth, by creating the most favorable perception of development, culture, and most importantly attitudes toward Thais on the part of the Chinese people. This practice of holding summer camps also helps create catalysts or even influencers for the promotion of China's soft power in Thailand by spreading positive reviews about China by former program participants. In the context of my research, students who had a short experience with China chose to connect their subsequent lives with this country under the strong impression of their participation in the summer program.

### 4.2.3 Discovering Language Aspect

*Language as motivation for studying in China was cited by 8 respondents. (G, L, H, S, C, A, D, U)*

As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of respondents cited several reasons for choosing to study in China, and among these drivers, Chinese language was the second most frequently cited factor. Although most studies often consider language as an integral part of culture, my observations led me to the perspective that the Chinese language as a factor should be considered independently in the context of my study. This is due to the fact that some respondents identified Chinese language as a motivating factor, separate from their cultural interests related to the Middle Kingdom. During the interviews, respondents emphasized their views on the practical benefits of speaking Chinese, which results in higher-paying jobs or career prospects.

Moreover, some respondents devoted significant time to studying Chinese starting from early childhood. At the same time, Chinese is often the only single foreign language that Thai students own. Although it cannot be denied that language and culture are closely intertwined, in the context of this study, Chinese language played partially an independent role in shaping the motivation for choosing China as a study destination. In this section of the analysis, I explore my respondents' views on the importance of language in the decision-making process when choosing Chinese universities.

Regarding my interviews, respondent G's previous passion for Chinese language fueled a burning desire to explore the country, he stated: "I learned Chinese when I was little so I just wanted to be in China once in a lifetime". Meanwhile, respondent H has studied Chinese since kindergarten, making it an obvious choice for her and her family for her further education. The mentioned response confirmed that "I have been learning Chinese since kindergarten until upper secondary school. So, my family supports and suggests that I study in China". For Respondent C, the appeal of living abroad and knowing a widespread foreign language motivated her decision. It was pointed out "I knew that Chinese is really popular here, so I would like to learn how to communicate in Chinese".

Student S's motivation for studying in China was rooted in a deep interest in Chinese language and culture, coupled with a desire to live in the country

and learn a third language after several trips to China. Student A was introduced to the world of Chinese language and its intricacies during her study at high school. Wanting to broaden her perspective by living abroad and being impressed by her initial success in Chinese, she decided to improve her language skills and chose China as the ideal place to improve her language skills and get experience living abroad.

Respondent D's acquaintance with Chinese language occurred through communication with Chinese friends. These meetings gave rise to her desire to learn the language for communication, and subsequently, she expressed "I found out Chinese is as important as English, it is better to know Chinese to get a great job with a higher salary". My other respondent L in addition to her other main stimulant, also paid attention to the importance of Chinese. She emphasized the widespread usage of Mandarin language in the regional labor market. According to her Mandarin is widely used in a number of countries in the region, especially in trade and business between Thailand and China, as well as a large number of tourists who require Chinese skills to work with. For respondent U, her interest in Chinese artists and her father's point of view on the importance of Chinese language played a decisive role in choosing a university. She shared "My father wants me to study in China because he sees that nowadays Chinese is quite an important language".

To summarize, the motivations of the interviewees who expressed language as one of their drives for studying in China vary, with respondents G and H driven by their lifelong Chinese language learning, respondent C by the allure of living abroad and learning a widely spoken language, Student S and A by their profound interest in Chinese language and culture, and respondent D, L, and U by the recognition of the professional and regional importance of the Chinese language, reflecting a diverse set of personal and career-related reasons for choosing China as their study destination.

#### **4.2.4 Discovering China's Development and Prosperity Aspect along with Quality of China's Education and Career Perspective upon Graduation**

Over the past 40 years, China has made tectonic progress to withdraw its citizens from poverty, so the number of people whose income is less than 1.90 US dollars per day (which is the global border of poverty determined by the World Bank) has decreased by almost 800 million people. (Bank, 2022)

The economic achievements of China, including the production, consumption, trade, flow of capital, and tourism, not only significantly influenced the regional economy, but also made the country the driver of economic growth for the whole world. This economic development significantly contributed to the formation of China as an attractive place for foreigners from all over the world guided by various reasons, thereby indirectly associating itself with the soft power of the country. Currently, China is classified as an upper-middle-income country. Significant economic growth, reached by China in recent decades, not only transformed the perception of the country among its own citizens but granted respect in the international arena. Although economic power in itself does not determine the “soft power”, it certainly plays a key role in creating a global image of the country.

The world community often considers China as a country with great economic capabilities than in its homeland. Favorable conditions for trade relations, investment prospects and the growing consumer market make it an attractive place for businessmen and entrepreneurs from around the world. Another important aspect of the development of the Chinese economy in the eyes of the foreign public is Chinese technological achievements. The embodiment of technological achievements is served by brands such as Huawei, Xiaomi, and Alibaba. They contribute to the formation of the image of China as a center of innovation. The foreign public can consider Chinese innovations as a symbol of progress and modernity. China plays a significant role in global economic management, as evidenced by a number of economic initiatives. This reflects China’s desire to stimulate economic development around the world. Given the quantity and significance of international economic institutions where China plays a key role, the foreign public considers China a responsible and significant player in the world economic arena. The economic prosperity of China, undoubtedly, strengthens its call to soft power at a global level. The foreign public often perceives China as a country of economic opportunities, innovation, and one of the most prosperous economic countries.

The author concluded that the two categories related to the level of development of China and the quality of its education, which respondents named as motivation for studying in China, are interrelated for 5 out of 7 respondents. Meanwhile, only two out of seven respondents were motivated solely by China’s

prosperity, without mentioning the quality of education as an incentive. Most of my respondents linked the quality of education with the development of the country, which is expressed in their desire to see their future in a prosperous state where they can receive a quality education. Therefore, it is advisable to consider the development factor of China together with the quality of its education in the study.

It is worth noting that in recent years, higher education in China has made significant progress. The country's leading universities are nominated in the rankings of the best universities in the world. According to one of the authoritative agencies Times Higher Education rankings for 2024, 58 Chinese universities are among the top 1000 global universities, and the top two universities of China are the best in Asia. China's educational reputation is on the rise thanks to guidelines such as government programs for increasing the quality and reputation of its higher education. Programs such as 211 Project, 985 Project, and Double First Class University Plan. These initiatives aim to improve the standards of China's top 100 and top 40 universities respectively. Thus, we can confidently say that Thai students are interested in studying in China. (China Education Online, 2023; MoE, 2006; Times Higher Education, 2023)

*This part of my analysis involved 7 respondents who cited China's development progress and the quality of its higher education during interviews. China's development and prosperity - I, E, T, M, O, P, R and Quality of China's education and career perspective upon graduation - E, I, T, P, M*

The interview results provide valuable information on the two main factors that inspired the interviewees to choose China for their education. During the interviews, frequent motives were revealed that explain their choice, including economic development of the country, high quality of education, developed infrastructure and technology, favorable environment, and personal safety, which goes into the two previously mentioned stimulus (development of China and quality of education).

A number of respondents noted that one of the main reasons for choosing China is China's rapid economic development and growth. They perceive China as a constantly developing state with potential for personal and career growth. Respondents like I, O, and R were faced with the desire to become part of a progressing



country, which will lead to their future being superb side by side with China's prosperity.

The Chinese education system received positive feedback from respondents T and E. They felt that China provides a conducive environment for learning and can be proud of its high-quality educational institutions. For instance, respondent T stated, "I think China has a good environment to live in and the educational system in China is excellent".

Active development and technological innovation affected the interest of some respondents, identified as E and M. Their attention was drawn to China's extensive transportation networks, modern railway systems, and overall progress in such things as education and trade. As respondent E noted, "I want to see China's railway system, which is number one in the world".

A number of interviewees, including O and P, noted that China's prosperity serves as a significant incentive. The image of China as a successful developing nation with a developed construction industry, a rapidly growing economy, and leading universities coincides with their focus on achievement and progress. For instance, respondent P remarked, "China is a developing and fast-growing country, especially in construction industry, and has top-ranking universities".

Interviewees I and T identified the safe and supportive environment in China as a factor in their choice to study there. They described China as a welcoming and open country, offering comfortable living conditions and excellent education. As respondent I stated, "China is considered a safe country for students".

Finally, respondent R mentioned China's development opportunities as a motivating factor, demonstrating a desire for her growth and development within the country. She confirmed "China's development opportunities, make me want to develop in China".

To conclude the discussion in this section, the motivation of Thai students to study in China is determined by many factors, including China's economic development, the quality of its educational system, the development of infrastructure and the use of modern technologies, the attractiveness of the country's environment and general welfare. Notably, five out of seven respondents emphasize the close relationship between China's development and the quality of its educational

institutions, thereby highlighting the importance of these factors in the decision-making process. Also, some respondents noted the high ranking of universities as an additional motivator when deciding whether to study in China. The findings of this section highlight factors related to China's economic progress that contribute to its attractiveness as a desirable destination for Thai students. In other words, they emphasize the efficiency of China's soft power.

#### **4.2.5 Discovering the Desire to be Exposed to a Foreign Life**

The motivation of some of my respondents to broaden their horizons by studying abroad is closely related to the concept that has been discussed earlier in the theoretical part of my research - "More flexibility and openness." According to Beth Ann Z. Zielinski, flexibility and openness entail "a willingness to be receptive and enjoy the opportunity to get acquainted with different ways of thinking and behavior of another culture." (Zielinski, 2007)

During my interview, one of the respondents, respondent E said: "I want to experience a new culture and be exposed to a broader vision" This statement reflects a strong desire to embrace different cultural points of view and expand one's worldview through studying abroad. Similarly, respondent G shared that his personal growth prompted him to seek new experiences and life events. In this case, the student not only expressed a strong desire to feel a new life but also emphasized his openness to personal development and new experiences.

Respondent O states the extent to which she sincerely shares practices of Chinese culture and strives to personally experience the daily life of the Chinese people. This response demonstrates a sincere affinity for Chinese culture and a willingness to fully immerse herself in the local way of life.

Another respondent, respondent A expressed her motivation by saying: "I strive to improve my Chinese language skills while simultaneously immersing myself in a new culture and lifestyle". This student's statement demonstrates a strong commitment to actively exploring another culture and alternative lifestyle.

Respondent B shared her initial incentive, saying, "I had a negative impression of China because of the media image, but I decided to come and see with my own eyes whether the culture conforms to these stereotypes." Here, the student

acknowledges preconceived notions but also demonstrates curiosity and willingness to challenge these preconceived notions through direct experience.

These direct quotes from the interviewed students illustrate their receptivity to the idea of immersing themselves in a new culture and exploring the experience of studying abroad. Their statements demonstrate a sincere interest in cultural exchange, personal growth, and willingness to fully accept the culture of the host country. Together, these and other factors make them more susceptible to the influence of China's "soft power" during their study abroad.

#### **4.2.6 Discovering the Role of Chinese Media Content**

*The discussion section of my analysis involved 5 respondents who mentioned their interest in Chinese media content as motivation for studying in China. Chinese media content (including TV series and its celebrities) - Q, M, N, U, K*

Chinese soft power has significantly expanded its global influence through various forms of media content, including films, television series, music and online novels. The purpose of this section is to examine the impact of Chinese media content on shaping the incentives for my respondents to study in China. My interviews demonstrate the role of Chinese media in shaping perceptions of the Thai language, stimulating language learning, and promoting cultural exchange.

Respondent M's desire to become a translator for Chinese stars highlights the magnetic pull of Chinese media content that sparks interest in language and culture. Chinese films and TV series often serve as a gateway for people like respondent N, who was initially immersed in Chinese language journey because of her love for Chinese films and TV series. The lack of subtitles and Thai dubbing in Chinese content encourages viewers to immerse themselves in the language, making language learning a natural outcome.

Interviewee Q's narrative further highlights the key role of Chinese media content in promoting language learning and cultural exchange. Her passion for Chinese entertainment, including films, television series, and music, led her to become a passionate student of Chinese language. This phenomenon extends to many other people who learn Chinese because of their love for Chinese celebrities and the vibrant entertainment industry.

Respondent Q's assertion that chasing Chinese celebrities serves as a personal motivation to learn Chinese highlights the dual impact of Chinese media content. While this contributes significantly to China's cultural soft power at the national level, it also plays a key role in motivating people to begin their language-learning journey. The influence of Chinese celebrities such as Cai Xukun serves as a driving force for respondent Q and other beginning learners, linking language learning with admiration for a variety of Chinese stars.

Respondent U's statement about her father's desire for her to study in China highlights the broader implications of Chinese soft power. However, the respondent demonstrated agreement with her father's choice as Chinese media content, especially artists acts as a catalyst for her interest in China.

Interviewee K's passion for Chinese TV shows, TV series, and audition programs illustrates how Chinese media content generates genuine interest in the language through its media content. For many, like interviewee K, the appeal of Chinese media goes beyond mere entertainment, this is expressed in a sincere desire to learn the language and join Chinese culture after a long time of consuming Chinese media content.

Chinese media content has become a powerful tool for promoting Chinese soft power in Thailand and around the world. From interviews with respondents, the author can witness how Chinese films, television series, music, and celebrities have given birth to a true interest in language and culture among the Thai population. This phenomenon not only contributes to individual motivation to learn a language but also influences educational choices and diplomatic relations.

China's significant investment in its media industry, including collaboration with international partners, has proven successful in spreading its culture and values. As interviewee Q accordingly put it, Chinese media content has become a channel for cultural exchange, stimulating communication between people and creating a positive impression of China. It was accurately witnessed by respondent Q "I know almost all Chinese celebrities and singers, and I think this should be Chinese soft power because besides me, there are many people who come to learn Chinese because they like Chinese TV dramas and celebrities".

Based on the discussion of this section, the influence of Chinese media content on Thai society illustrates the multifaceted nature of soft power, where entertainment serves as a catalyst for deeper cultural interaction and language learning, ultimately strengthening diplomatic and cultural ties between China and Thailand. Of particular note is the enormous influence on Thai youth, who are most exposed to the influence of mass culture from an early age.

#### **4.2.7 Discovering Factors of Scholarship Provision, Sino-Thai Relationships, and Chinese Heritage as Factors That Influenced Motivation for Education in CHINA**

Many Thai students are attracted to China because of the availability of affluent scholarships that cover tuition fees, dormitory fees, accident insurance, and living expenses. These scholarships make China an affordable destination for higher education and demonstrate China's commitment to investing in international education, thereby enhancing its soft power. Respondent B said, "At first I didn't have any interest in studying in China until I applied for a scholarship and got it".

Good relations between China and Thailand, as well as growing economic ties, make studying in China attractive. Thai students can realize the value of knowing Chinese in accessing job markets and business opportunities arising from China's economic presence in Thailand, additionally with the inspiration of friendly interstate relations. The respondent's L statement was "At that time, China had good relations with Thailand".

Some Thai students, such as respondent J, can be motivated to study in China because of their passion for their ethnicity and family background. Considering the significant number of Thais of Chinese descent, it can be said that personal connections with Chinese culture and heritage can stimulate their desire to deepen their understanding of their origins through experiences while studying in China. This interviewee emphasized, "I want to be more familiar with my family origin".

To summarize, the author recognizes the motivation of Thai students to study in China, which includes scholarships, economic opportunities, and personal or ancestral connections, all of which contribute to the development of Chinese soft power and educational exchanges between the two countries.

#### **4.2.8 Respondents' Impression of China Prior to the Commencement of Their Studies**

*Positive and extremely positive: A, C, D, E, F, J, K, M, N, O, P, Q, S, U (14).*

*Moderate or neutral: G, H, I, L, R, T (6).*

*Pessimistic: B (1).*

Regarding the impressions of respondents about China before the start of their studies, the absolute majority expressed extremely positive opinions. The study finds that 14 respondents (A, C, D, E, F, J, K, M, N, O, P, Q, S, U) had a favorable or even extra favorable opinion of China before starting their studies. 6 respondents (G, H, I, L, R, T) had neutral or even closer to positive impressions, and only one respondent (B) had a quite pessimistic impression of China. Speaking about the factors that influenced the formation of respondents' impression of China, it is worth saying that a wide range of factors contributed to the formation of the image of China for my respondents.

As was stated, prior to beginning respondents' studies in China, their impressions of the country varied, but the majority expressed positive opinions. Many respondents (A, C, D, E, F, J, K, M, N, O, P, Q, S, U, T) had highly favorable opinions of China. Factors contributing to positive impressions included the appeal of China's development, the country's atmosphere, delicious food, cleanliness, and the friendliness of the people. The perception of Chinese as hardworking and patriotic citizens also influenced a positive view. For example, respondent M said "Chinese people are nice. The environment of China is very beautiful", another respondent U also stated, "My impression of China is the economic progress of the country. I see China as a country that has developed so amazingly that it is now an economic leader". Other respondents in a familiar manner witnessed their positive impression mostly based on the economic development of China or the influence of Chinese celebrities/media content in the formation of impressions on them. Thus, respondent Q shared "Chinese culture, beautiful scenic spots, delicious food, TV dramas, and celebrities can all impress me". Along with this statement, another familiar impression was shared by respondent T who said "Chinese TV show series, I watched many of

them. They made me see the way of life of Chinese people and wanted to try living in China”.

Neutral or nearly positive impressions represented by a group of respondents (G, H, I, L, R,) held neutral or moderately positive impressions. Economic development and recommendations from seniors were some of the factors that influenced these impressions. Respondent H said “My senior recommended it as a good place to live”, this respondent and familiar answers implied that their impression was mostly based on the positive experience of other students who had good experience of studying in China.

Only one of my respondents in striking contrast with others had quite a pessimistic impression of China prior to the commencement of the study. Respondent B had an unfavorable impression, which was primarily influenced by negative media discourse. This respondent shared “I didn't have a good impression of China before I started my degree. But I came anyway because I was curious to see if the culture is really that bad according to the media. Turned out that China is an it is amazing country”.

In summary, almost all of the respondents had positive or neutrally positive impressions of China, with factors such as cultural appeal, economic development, media content, and personal experiences shaping their perceptions. It is noteworthy that several respondents initially had doubts due to the media or lack of knowledge but chose to study in China to challenge their preconceptions, leading to more positive outlooks. These impressions provide valuable context for understanding the diverse perspectives and experiences of the respondents during their education in China.

#### **4.2.9 Level of Language, Culture, Society Awareness**

The analysis presented in this section delves into the varying levels of proficiency and familiarity with Chinese language and culture demonstrated by the group of 21 respondents. My respondents were divided into three separate groups based on their experience in the field: the “Proficient” group, consisting of eight respondents who were proficient in Chinese language and culture; the “Limited or Basic” group, consisting of ten respondents with a limited level of awareness and understanding; and

the “Absence knowledge” group, which includes three respondents who went on an academic trip with minimal preconceptions about China.

In particular, 7 respondents spoke about their Chinese origin, which significantly influenced their knowledge, especially in the cultural and social aspects. These family connections greatly enriched their scientific and personal experiences with China.

Proficient in Chinese language and culture (A, E, G, H, J, L, O, P): Within this group of eight respondents who demonstrated a robust command of the Chinese language and culture, a noteworthy commonality emerged. Several of these individuals, including respondents A, E, J, and O, identified themselves as having partial Chinese ancestry. This ancestral linkage served as an influential underpinning for their heightened interest and proficiency in Chinese language and culture. Furthermore, respondents G, H, and P attributed their expertise to their involvement with formal educational institutions such as the Confucius Institute, which imparted a comprehensive understanding of Chinese language and culture.

Limited or basic familiarity in either language or Culture (B, F, I, K, M, N, S, R, T, U): In the case of the ten respondents who reported limited knowledge of Chinese language or culture, various factors came into play. Respondent K, for instance, garnered insights through media consumption and online resources, indicative of a more self-directed and informal learning approach. Respondents I and S utilized unique opportunities, such as interactions with Chinese individuals or familial connections, to acquire their understanding of Chinese culture. For respondent T, active engagement with news sources and literature played a significant role in their learning process, whereas respondent U benefited from having Chinese relatives within their family.

Absence of prior knowledge (C, D, Q): in contrast, three participants candidly confessed to a lack of prior familiarity with the Chinese language or culture before embarking on their academic journeys. The progress of this subgroup in comprehending Chinese language and culture underscores their relative inexperience. For instance, respondent C initiated their Chinese language learning journey upon arriving in China, marking a transformative immersion process. Respondents D and Q, however, embarked on their academic journeys with minimal preconceptions or



knowledge about China, with respondent Q's initially unfavorable perceptions undergoing a significant transformation during their participation in a summer camp in China.

Seven of the interviewees had Chinese heritage. Their level of proficiency in Chinese language varied, but all participants expressed confidence in their knowledge of Chinese culture and traditions, which have been preserved through generations in their families. These familial connections potentially played a crucial role in shaping their awareness. Respondents E, L, O, J, R, S, and U have Chinese ancestry or are of Chinese descent. This has given them a stronger foundation in Chinese language and culture. They noted that their families have significant Chinese heritage and ties, which have contributed to their cultural understanding. For example, respondent J is Thai Chinese that factor enhanced his understanding of both Thai and Chinese cultures. Furthermore, Respondent S acquired insights into Chinese culture and society from her ethnic Chinese grandfather, exemplifying the intergenerational transfer of knowledge. On the whole, these familial and ancestral ties conferred differing degrees of familiarity and comprehension of Chinese customs, language, and traditions, spanning from rudimentary acquaintance to profound comprehension.

Relying on the example of interviewee O who stated "I grew up in an ethnic Chinese family, with half of my Chinese ancestry. My family life has a strong Chinese flavor". This strong familial connection to Chinese heritage likely played a pivotal role in shaping respondents' familiarity with Chinese language and culture. The mentioned statement that her "family life has a strong Chinese flavor" suggests that her daily life and upbringing were imbued with Chinese customs, traditions, and possibly language. As a result, Respondent O and other respondents with Chinese heritage likely possess a deeper and more intimate understanding of Chinese culture compared to respondents without such a direct family connection. This background has likely enriched their academic and personal experiences related to China.

In conclusion, this comprehensive analysis underscores the multi-faceted nature of respondents' connections to their Chinese ancestry or heritage and its profound impact on their familiarity with the Chinese language and culture. Among the 21 respondents, 18 exhibited an above-average level of knowledge and understanding of China, highlighting their pre-existing linguistic and cultural awareness. These

varying levels of familiarity with Chinese language and culture are poised to significantly influence the perceptions, adaptation, and experiences of Thai students within the Chinese academic milieu and society.

#### **4.2.10 Channel for Obtaining Information about Studying in China**

The author found two main sources to obtain information about education in China. This is the personal efforts of my respondents and the institutional factor, such as the Confucius Institute, high schools, and teachers.

Self-initiated efforts - Respondents A, B, C, F, G, I, M, S, and T took advantage of study opportunities in China through self-initiated efforts, which may include educational exhibitions, advertising of Chinese universities, social media, which provided to respondents with the channel to obtain information about their possible degree in China.

Educational institutions such as high schools or Confucius Institutes, along with teachers who teach Chinese at Thai schools, are also channels for disseminating information about studying in China. Respondents D, H, J, N, O, P, Q, R, E, K, L, and U received information about studying in China through their educational institutions, recommendations from teachers, elders, or the Confucius Institute. This category includes sources related to formal education and support systems.

The author briefly seeks to delve into the role of Confucius Institutes and teachers who teach Chinese in Thai secondary schools (local teachers) and CI teachers (Chinese citizens) as promoters of Chinese education for Thai youth.

Confucius Institutes play a critical role in the promotion of Chinese language and culture internationally. They are often associated with universities and educational institutions and are supported by the Chinese government. My respondents confirmed that Confucius Institutes provide guidance and resources to students interested in pursuing higher education in China, helping them find scholarships, assist with applications, determine a suitable university and other academic opportunities, and even provide them with reference documents or recommendation letters confirming that student has been attending the institute. Therefore, Confucius Institutes create networks that connect Thai students with educational institutions in China and assist with opening doors to various academic paths.

Thai teachers teaching Chinese in Thai secondary schools play a key role in promoting Chinese education for Thai youth. They inspire students to learn Chinese, highlighting the importance of the language in their careers. As seen in respondents D, H, and R, teachers often recommend scholarships, universities, and programs to their students based on their experience and knowledge. It is noteworthy that a significant number of these teachers were once themselves students at Chinese universities or are actively participating in exchange programs. Short or long-term programs often include comprehensive training for foreign teachers specializing in Chinese education at the best normal universities in the country. Upon successful completion, participants are awarded academic degrees. Additionally, almost all of these initiatives are generously funded by the Chinese government, carried out in China, and provided with stipends for participants.

Many Chinese teachers in Thai high schools prepare students for the HSK exam, which is required to apply for scholarships and further study in China. Chinese teachers can serve as a bridge between students and Confucius Institutes by encouraging students to participate in Confucius Institute programs and receive scholarships. Chinese teachers impart not only language skills but also cultural knowledge, promoting a holistic understanding of China and its culture. My respondents confirmed the key role of their teachers as a guide for information about studying in China.

A prominent example is represented by respondent R who shared “When I was a Chinese major in high school, my Chinese teacher recommended a channel to study in China”. The other answer given by respondent O stated, “My high school Chinese teacher told me that I could apply for the International Chinese Teacher Scholarship in China, pass the exam, and then apply successfully”.

Thus, Confucius Institutes and Chinese language teachers in Thai high schools play a vital role in promoting Chinese education among Thai youth. They provide language education, recommend scholarships, offer guidance, and promote cultural exchange, making the path to study in China more accessible and attractive for Thai students. Their efforts help strengthen educational and cultural ties between Thailand and China and, therefore ensure highly efficient outcomes for China’s soft power in Thailand. In other words, China has the opportunity to promote its soft

initiatives not only on its own but has already acquired Thai facilitators in the Thai education system.

#### **4.2.11 Scholarship**

Of the 21 respondents who took part in the study, 18 received some kind of scholarship during their studies. Specifically, 8 respondents received scholarships directly from the Chinese government through national, provincial, or Confucius Institute programs. In addition, 10 respondents mentioned receiving scholarships sponsored by their universities. Only 3 respondents reported that they had not received any financial support during their studies. It is important to emphasize that even university scholarships are funded by the government since all interviewees study in China's public universities that on the balance of the state budget, thus it can be stated that 85% of my respondents were supported by financial assistance from China during their studies.

The author investigated the influence of financial support (scholarship) on Thai students' decisions to pursue higher education in China. Despite the availability of scholarships, all three respondents prioritized studying at prestigious universities over securing financial aid. Respondent I emphasized her desire to study in China regardless of the scholarship availability. She shared that as her family had financial opportunities to cover tuition fees, she wanted to study only in Shanghai. Respondent S, while acknowledging a scholarship opportunity at another university that she had, valued the prestige (rankings) of her chosen university. The respondent noted China's lower education costs and her family's financial ability to support her studies. Similarly, Respondent T, currently in his second grade, expressed his preference for a prestigious university despite the potential for getting a scholarship at lower-ranking universities, repeating his focus on academic quality over financial assistance.

This study challenges the assumption that financial aid is always the main motivator for Thai students when choosing to study in China. While scholarships do play a role for many, interviews with these three students who did not receive scholarships reveal a more nuanced picture. Academic prestige, personal motivations, and city-specific interests may outweigh financial considerations. Although the study does not delve into the correlation between university prestige/rankings and China's

soft power and their impact on Thai students, this finding provides valuable insight into the role of university prestige as one of the criteria and instruments of China's soft power.

### **4.3 Influence of the Time Spent in China on Thai Students' Perception**

Interviews conducted with 3 groups of Thai students studying in China for 1 up to 3 years (group 1), 2 up to 5 years (group 2), and over 4 years provide valuable information on how the length of their stay and their knowledge of Chinese language, culture, and society affect their perceptions of China's domestic and foreign policies. In addition, these interviews shed light on the extent to which they agree with and support China's policies and development model. This comprehensive and detailed analysis is firmly based on the research questions and interview findings.

#### **Group 1 (1-2 years)**

*The influence of the length of study in China on the opinion of Thai students:*

The length of study in China is a crucial factor shaping the perceptions of Thai students. The interviews illustrate varying degrees of change in their views and offer detailed insight into the reasons for these changes.

Limited change with reinforcement. Respondent D noted that his initial impressions of China remained largely unchanged during the study period. However, it is worth noting that the respondent's initial impressions were very positive; after 2 years of studying in China, these impressions were reinforced by a deeper understanding of Chinese patriotism, hard work, and determination of the Chinese nation. The duration of the study helped to reinforce previously existing favorable opinions. This respondent emphasized, "My thoughts have not changed much since I came to China. My experience in China has emphasized my impression of China".

A positive shift in views can be observed in respondents E and M. Compared to respondent D, Respondents E and M experienced significant positive changes in their views during their studies. Those interviewees believed that China's rapid development and the convenience of living in China played an important role in

changing their views. The reasons for this positive shift were primarily from personal experience living in the country.

Respondents consistently attributed the development of their impressions to direct experience, emphasizing the key role of direct interaction with the Chinese people and culture. This experience dispelled stereotypes and provided a more nuanced and accurate understanding of China.

*Regarding views on China's development model and policies:*

Thai students' views on China's development model and policies show a generally positive orientation, emphasizing particular aspects of the Chinese system that have caught their attention.

Positive perceptions of the development model. Although the respondents did not go into this aspect in detail, they expressed a positive view of China's development model. They noted convenience and security in daily life, especially in aspects such as cashless payments and efficient regulation of life. For example, interviewee E discussing China's development model and policies said "Believing and adhering to the same thing and doing everything according to the rules, without connections bribery". The other familiar feedback was given by respondent T "I think, I am impressed by how well China is organized. Regulations allow us to solve urgent problems quickly and safely." Several other students in this group shared their impression of China's domestic policies and development model, as example respondent K shared "I am impressed by the safety and speed of Chinese delivery systems. It is much more convenient than in many cities in Thailand".

There is a clear recognition of China's importance on the world stage. All of Thai students in this group noted the country's thriving economy and its current prominent role in the global economy, especially in trade. They also anticipate China's growing role in the future in both regional and global developments. For example, some respondents firmly stated that China should be the world's leading power, respondent E "China should be the world's leading power because of the development of technology that is more advanced than other countries." On the other hand, other respondents of this group still recognizing the importance of China expressed the idea that China should not be the only dominating country. Respondent D stated "I think China is now a world superpower. It is a competitor to the United States. But there

should not be just two great powers. So, I don't support China being the only superpower. Other developed countries should also help drive the direction of society at the macro level.”

Opinions on whether China should become the world's leading power vary from surely positive to moderate among respondents. While some supported the idea, pointing to China's potential in various fields, others were more cautious and emphasized the importance of taking into account the majority view and China's effective economic governance. Respondent U said “I can't answer whether I should or shouldn't be. Because we must mainly look at the majority of people. However, it is a country that manages its economy well”.

*Influence of knowledge of language, culture, and society:*

Knowledge of Chinese language, culture, and society is recognized as a powerful factor influencing Thai students' worldview.

Interviewees consistently emphasized the role of cultural knowledge in broadening their worldview. They recognized that understanding language and culture was important in gaining a comprehensive view of China.

Knowledge of Chinese language, culture, values, and society was consistently cited as having a positive influence on Thai students' views of China. Cultural understanding played a key role in this transformation, which was confirmed by all respondents in this group.

Touching on the impact on understanding China's politics and development model. Greater knowledge in these areas led to a better understanding of China's policies and development model. Students appreciated China's strong state administration and its attention to national interests.

Regarding the potential lack of understanding of China's policies among ordinary people unfamiliar with Chinese culture, language, society, and development patterns. Respondents unanimously recognized that a lack of knowledge about Chinese language, culture, values, and society could lead to misperceptions. It was emphasized that cultural awareness is crucial to forming accurate views.

Regarding the potential lack of understanding of Chinese policies among ordinary people who are unfamiliar with Chinese culture, language, society, and development patterns. For example, interviewee K confirmed “Yes, because of

listening to news from one side. Without filtering that information at all. Plus, I have soft ears and only listen to other people. Even though that person has never been to China before”. Respondents unanimously recognized that a lack of knowledge about Chinese language, culture, values, and society can lead to erroneous opinions. It was emphasized that cultural awareness is crucial to forming accurate views.

The interviews revealed that Thai students initially held misconceptions or misunderstandings about China. However, these misunderstandings were dispelled through their experiences in the country. An interesting explanation was given by respondent D “Yes, I have known in the past that Chinese people are stingy and too frugal. But after learning about the reasons why Chinese people have this behavior, I have a greater understanding. Moreover, I used to think that Chinese people fled the country and settled in Thailand because China was not a good place to live. But after studying, I understood that Chinese people have been good at trading since ancient times and that is why Chinese people are all over the world”.

While recognizing the positive impact of cultural knowledge, students also believed that mastery of the Chinese language and a deep understanding of the culture were necessary to fully understand the intricacies of Chinese society.

*Differences in points of view:*

It is important to note that while the majority of respondents expressed a favorable view of China, opinions on specific aspects varied. For example, there was a spectrum of views regarding the speed of China’s development and China’s potential to become a leading world power. This diversity of opinions within the group of Thai students studying in China emphasizes the complexity of factors influencing the development of their views.

To summarize the analysis of this group, it can be argued that the findings from the interviews provide further insight into the factors influencing their changing views on China. These views cover many dimensions, including China’s domestic and foreign policies, development model, and global role.

To conclude, the duration of study in China has a significant impact on Thai students’ impressions and understanding of the country. Their experiences and interactions with Chinese culture, society, and people during this period played a key role in shaping their views. Moreover, knowledge of Chinese language, culture, and



society is recognized as a powerful tool to improve understanding and form more accurate opinions. Respondents generally recognize China's global influence and potential to complicate their evolving views, and their diverse perspectives highlight the multifaceted nature of their experiences and perceptions. These results emphasize the importance of cultural awareness and personal experience in developing accurate views of China's domestic and foreign policies and its role as a world power. This comprehensive analysis deepens our understanding of Thai students' changing views of China and provides valuable insights for future research and policy development.

### **Group 2 (2-4 years)**

*The influence of the length of study in China on the opinion of Thai students:*

The interviews show that the length of study in China significantly influences this group of Thai students' views on China's domestic policies and development model. Several key findings emerge.

A common theme throughout the interviews was the change in perceptions over time. Thai students often undergo a transformation from initial, potentially negative, or limited impressions of China to more nuanced and positive views as the length of their stay increases. The interviews contain valuable stories that reflect this transformation. For example, Respondent A notes that being in China for an extended period of time allowed him to experience China's rapid development and offset the initial culture shock. He said "Yes, my impression changed. China has already developed much more than Thailand and also the culture shock doesn't exist everywhere like most people say."

Another respondent F shared that her educational experience in China resulted in a noticeable change in the views, characterized by a shift from negative impressions to more favorable views. The respondent's experience in China dispelled initial negative perceptions of Chinese hygiene and organization. Regarding the question about her current impression, she stated "It has changed, because I often heard that China was an unhygienic and bad-organized country in the past before ever going to China. But when I went to China, I realized the truth that it is a very clean and well-organized country".

Longer duration of stay allows Thai students to become more deeply immersed in Chinese culture, thereby promoting a better understanding of domestic policies and development patterns. Through direct interaction with Chinese society, students gain insight into aspects such as governance, social dynamics, and cultural intricacies, which promotes more nuanced perspectives.

Some respondents emphasize that critical thinking plays an important role in this transformation. They recognize the need to critically analyze and avoid simplistic comparisons between China and Thailand, recognizing that the two countries are unique and cannot be directly compared. This suggests that the duration of training allows for a more thoughtful and analytical approach to forming opinions.

*Regarding views on China's development model and policies.*

Although the interviewers refrained from delving into the specifics of how length of study influences views on Chinese foreign policy, it is clear that long stays in China contribute to a more informed view of the situation.

Analysis of interviews with this group of respondents shows that Thai students who spend more time in China are increasingly aware of China's global role and its foreign policy initiatives. This increased awareness may result from direct contact with Chinese society, interaction with the international community within China, and a greater understanding of China's aspirations and contributions on the world stage.

For instance, the interview with respondent J reveals a shift in her opinion of China, primarily influenced by China's state administration system and its organizational efficiency. Her positive view of China's development model is characterized by well-developed cities and infrastructure. The interviewee also recognizes China's importance on the global stage and acknowledges China's potential as a leading world power.

Interviewee O's interview highlights the transformative impact of studying in China. Her impression of China has changed significantly under the influence of China's dynamic lifestyle and education system, resulting in a more favorable opinion. She values China's emphasis on both hard and soft power and recognizes its global contributions. Respondent O expressed her thoughts about China's role in the world "Nowadays, Chinese people are all over the world, and as one of the permanent

members of the United Nations, China has made immeasurable contributions to the development and promotion of the world economy and the development of various countries”.

*Influence of knowledge of language, culture, and society:*

Knowledge of Chinese language, culture and society becomes a decisive factor in shaping Thai students’ acceptance and support of Chinese policies and development models.

The interviews constantly emphasize that knowledge of Chinese language, culture, and society significantly influences the worldview of Thai students. It promotes a deeper understanding of cultural nuances, traditions, customs, and social dynamics in China. This deeper understanding broadens their horizons.

A common theme across all interviews is that greater knowledge of Chinese language, culture, values, and society profoundly influences Thai students’ opinions of China. Although the extent of this influence varies among respondents, most indicate that it has an impact. This influence is particularly evident in their appreciative observations of China’s governance, social interaction, and contributions to various global sectors.

Thai students recognize that a comprehensive understanding of Chinese language, culture, values and society helps them better understand China’s complex politics and development model. This is evident in recognizing the nuances in China’s system of governance, the applicability of certain policies to its large population, and the alignment of those policies with China’s national conditions.

Respondents collectively acknowledge that misunderstandings and misconceptions can arise when there is a lack of knowledge about Chinese language, culture, values and society. They emphasize that cultural immersion and language proficiency are vital to bridging this gap and developing more accurate opinions.

The influence of language-cultural knowledge is evident in respondents’ assessments of China’s management style. The interviews highlight the importance of comprehensive understanding and also acknowledge the need for ongoing learning and cultural immersion. For example, the greater knowledge of Chinese language, culture, values, and society significantly shapes respondent F’s understanding of China’s policies and development model. Regarding the question of language, culture, and

society understanding respondent F stated “Yes, it influences us a lot. Especially when we understand Chinese more, we can understand Chinese cultures and values more easily therefore its politics”.

The interviews highlight the importance of lifelong learning and cultural immersion. All respondents view their current knowledge as a starting point, clearly understanding that they need to delve deeper into the intricacies of Chinese culture and language to achieve a deeper understanding.

The interview concludes by offering a comprehensive analysis of how the length of study and knowledge of Chinese language, culture, and society influence Thai students’ views on Chinese domestic and foreign policy. These results show a dynamic transformation of perceptions over time, with a clear emphasis on the importance of cultural immersion and lifelong learning to develop more accurate and informed perspectives. Thai students recognize that a deeper understanding of China’s culture and language plays an important role in shaping their opinions and understanding of China’s policies and development model.

### **Group 3 (over 4 years)**

#### *Impact of length of study in China:*

A large majority of respondents reported a noticeable change in their perceptions of China over the course of the study. This transformation was often positive and characterized by an evolution from preconceived notions to a more nuanced and informed point of view.

The study experience in China played a critical role in shaping these impressions. Direct interaction with Chinese society, culture, and people played a crucial role. Living in China, interacting with locals, and being immersed in everyday life in China were common factors that led to a more accurate understanding of the country.

Many respondents emphasized that it is important to see things with their own eyes and not rely solely on external sources or stereotypes. They emphasized that personal experiences, from experiencing local cuisine to participating in cultural events, played an important role in broadening their horizons.

*Views on China's development model and policies:*

Some respondents viewed China's domestic policies and development model favorably. They particularly praised the country's achievements in transportation, technology, and education, which were seen as improving the convenience and quality of life of its citizens.

While not all respondents went into detail, some acknowledged that China's direction and progress are closely linked to its government's policies and management. The role of government in achieving economic development and technological progress was recognized.

For example, many respondents paid attention to China's development and the crucial role of China's government in the development process. Respondent G stated "According to what we have seen, China used to develop more slowly than Thailand, but, currently, China has advanced many steps ahead of Thailand. This can be seen from the development of many things in the country".

*China's global role:*

Respondents generally acknowledged China's growing influence on the world stage. They attributed this to the country's rapid economic growth, its large population, and the revolutionary technological contributions it made.

Potential Leading Power. Many respondents believed that China has the potential to become a leading global power in the future. This was caused by an assessment of the scale of China's achievements, both economic and technological. Some students also paid attention to China's role in regional development, for instance, respondent P said "China is playing an important role in the development of this region by giving free education opportunities. This thing attracts students from all over the region and the whole world". Additionally, this interviewee stated confidence in China's potential role of being the leading power "Of course. China has the target to be a leading power till 2030".

For example, respondent B gave an extensive view of China's development model and global role. The interviewee regarding domestic policy said "I'm very impressed with China's climate change policy. By 2030, China aims to decrease its carbon intensity by over 65 % from the 2005 level and to ...". By sharing her highly positive feelings towards China's climate policy the respondent intended to emphasize

the role of China's government in improvement of climate situation and health security not only at the domestic level, but also internationally. Later the same respondent discussing the global role of China stated "If China's power keeps growing at the same rate, we might use RMB as the international trade currency instead of USD in our lifetime". Additionally, the direct comparison between the US and China was also provided by this respondent by discussing potential China's world supremacy "America has been the world's leading country for decades. We already know how that is. I think the world needs change. I'm curious to see what the world would look like if China became the world's leading country".

*Influence of language and cultural knowledge:*

A central theme throughout the interviews was the transformative impact of knowledge about Chinese language, culture, and society on respondents' worldviews and understanding of China. Mastering the Chinese language was seen as an opportunity to better understand the nuances of the country.

Respondents consistently acknowledged that their understanding of China was positively impacted by increased knowledge of Chinese culture and values. It was clear that understanding the culture led to more nuanced and informed opinions about the country.

The interviews emphasized that misunderstandings are reduced through direct exposure to Chinese culture and society. Respondents admitted that they had misconceptions or misunderstandings in the past, especially in areas related to Chinese behavior and customs, which their experiences in China had dispelled.

During the interviews, there was consensus that lack of knowledge about Chinese language, culture, values, and society can lead to misconceptions. It was emphasized that cultural awareness and understanding are critical to developing accurate perspectives.

Separately, it is worth mentioning that a number of respondents especially highlighted the quality and accessibility of education in China as a motivating factor for studying in the country, which contributed to the formation of views on China. They viewed China as a practical choice for personal and academic growth given its educational opportunities. Thus, respondents expressed their gratitude to China for the opportunity to study education in the country.

Some respondents believed that mastery of the Chinese language and a deep understanding of the culture would greatly improve their understanding of China's development model, politics, and governance. Language proficiency was seen as an essential tool for understanding the intricacies of Chinese society.

While most respondents expressed a positive view of China, they also held varying opinions on specific aspects. For example, there was a spectrum of views regarding the speed of China's development and China's potential to become a leading world power.

#### **4.3.1 Conclusion of the Section**

In conclusion, the analysis of interviews conducted with three groups of Thai students who studied in China for different periods of time provides valuable insights into the factors that influence their perceptions of China's domestic and foreign policies. Length of stay in China, as well as knowledge of Chinese language, culture, and society, play a crucial role in shaping their views.

For Group 1 (1-2 years), it is clear that the length of study in China has a significant impact on the Thai students' impressions and understanding of the country. While some retain their initial positive impressions, others experience a positive shift under the influence of their direct experience in China. Knowledge of the Chinese language, culture, and society is recognized as a powerful tool in facilitating a more complete understanding of the country.

In the second group (2-4 years), Thai students' views change over time, with a longer stay in China helping to develop more nuanced and positive views. Critical thinking and a deeper understanding of cultural nuances facilitate this change. Length of study also influences understanding of China's global role and foreign policy, increasing awareness of China's contributions to the world.

In group 3 (more than 4 years), the impact of length of study is even more pronounced, leading to a shift from preconceived notions to informed and nuanced views. Direct interaction with Chinese society and culture plays a crucial role in this change. Knowledge of Chinese language, culture, and society is a crucial factor in shaping their views, as it deepens their understanding of China's domestic politics and development model.

Overall, the interviews highlight the importance of cultural awareness, personal experience, and knowledge of Chinese language and culture in developing accurate views of China's domestic and foreign policies. Thai students generally recognize China's global influence and potential, although opinions may vary on specific aspects. The findings provide a comprehensive insight into how length of study and cultural knowledge influence Thai students' changing views on China, providing valuable insights for future research and policy development.

The author's interview findings and observations clearly support the view that the length of time Thai students spend in China has a significant impact on their perceptions, especially regarding China's global role. It is also clear that the length of their stay is closely related to a deeper understanding of the country's culture, as well as its domestic and foreign policies.

#### **4.4 Influence of Personal Relations on Thai Students' Perception**

##### **Group 1 (1-2 years)**

The answers provided by this group of respondents show that the personal relationships formed while studying in China have a significant impact on their worldview. This experience helped challenge preconceived notions and stereotypes that students may have about the Chinese and their culture. Some respondents noted significant changes in their thinking, moving from misconceptions to more nuanced understanding.

*Impact of Developing Personal Relationships with Chinese Citizens on Thai Students' Worldview:*

For example, respondent D shared her initial belief that Chinese people were selfish and unoriginal, but interactions with Chinese friends led her to realize that these stereotypes were wrong. It was stated by respondent D "My mindset changed after I communicated with my Chinese friends. I used to think that Chinese people always copy others, but actually they just learned from others". Additionally, the respondent added, "Moreover, I used to think that Chinese people are very selfish, but I found out they are so generous". This highlights the power of interpersonal relationships in promoting cultural exchange and understanding. Similarly responding to the question



of whether Chinese people helped her to change her worldview, especially regarding China, respondent E emphasized how hanging out with Chinese friends helped her better understand the Chinese people and their lifestyle. She said, “This is right because Chinese friends help me to understand Chinese people and their life better”.

The theme of intercultural learning features prominently, with respondents gaining insight into Chinese history, language, and society through these personal relationships. A noticeable example was provided by respondent U who said “Yes, they help me with many things. Help me in my daily life and even in my studies because I communicate with them about the life and traditions of China. Analysis of interviews with respondents of this group suggests that educational experiences that promote cultural immersion and exchange can play a vital role in broadening worldviews and promoting cross-cultural understanding, thereby promoting Thai students’ adaptation to Chinese soft power through communication with Chinese citizens.

*Influence of Education in China on Thai Students’ Personal Development:*

Thai students in this group indicated that studying in China had a significant impact on their personal development, especially in terms of language proficiency. Learning Chinese has been a major component of their education in China, and this increased language proficiency has many implications. Not only does it help with academic success, but it also facilitates effective communication and cultural integration. Two good responses can be considered: respondent T shared “Studying in China made me improve my language skills even more, not only Chinese but also other languages via information exchange with other foreign friends”, respondent K also stated, “My education made my Chinese a lot better. You (I) must make the documents yourself (myself) and talk about everything in Chinese”.

Furthermore, the responses emphasize the wider impact of educational immersion. Exposure to different educational and social environments in China led to personal growth and the acquisition of adaptation skills. Respondent D regarding the influence of her education in China on her personal development said “I have become more determined and curious. This is because the environment is conducive to learning Chinese language and culture”. Later the same respondent shared that those things had helped her grow in a meaningful way. She mentioned that she had learned a lot of things that had given her a different perspective, and she remarked that it was a good aspect

of growing up. The other respondent K said, “Chinese society is considered competitive. When we are in any type of such environment, it will change us accordingly”.

In addition, it should be noted, that absolutely all respondents of this group have career aspirations and future plans highlight the important role of education in shaping their life trajectories. Many expressed a strong commitment to working in China, citing international experience and language skills as vital assets in their career development. For instance, respondent U expressed “In the future, I would like to work in China as a language interpreter or export products internationally. Because China is viewed as a developed country, maybe I can study for my master’s degree here and then work. Or response from respondent T stated, “I think that after graduation I will try to find a job in China for 2-3 years. I am still not sure what I would like to pursue in my master’s degree. First, I need to work to discover more”.

To sum up, in the respondents’ answers to the question of whether they have the intention to connect their future life with China the most prominent answer was familiar with respondent D or M who said “I am going to work for Chinese organizations in Thailand” or “Yes, I intend to study or work here” accordingly.

*Perceptions of the China-Thailand Relationship as a Result of Studying in China:*

This group’s perception of the relationship between China and Thailand appears to be positively influenced by their educational experiences in China. While some nuances and differences in opinion exist, the overarching sentiment is favorable. The students acknowledged the importance of language and cultural understanding in improving bilateral relations. This underscores the fundamental role of communication and mutual comprehension in diplomatic success. The respondents from this group gave diverse reasons for their perception of the Sino-Thai relationship.

For example, respondent D said “Very good in trade, investment, and tourism. I think Thailand is being taken advantage of by China in terms of investment. But that is because Thai laws are too favorable to foreign investors. Respondent E states “We are like neighbors who help each other”. Some respondents gave more specific responses, interviewee K said “I think it has been good because China has good relations with the Thai royal family”. Respondent U shared her concern about her

dissatisfaction stating “It is a traditional relationship. There are many Chinese migrants in Thailand, but it is not considered that China is interested in Thailand because I think that China has a better relationship with Russia”.

Furthermore, the respondents recognized the support provided by China during times of need, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Acts of solidarity and cooperation during crises can serve to strengthen relations between countries and foster future collaboration. Respondent T expressed “I think it is quite good but not the best. During the COVID-19 outbreak, China sent vaccines to support my country and always helped in other matters. However, after the COVID-19 matter, we noticed that the diplomacy between Thailand and China is not as good as it should be, as can be seen from the reluctance to take Thai students back to China for a long time during the pandemic”.

Regarding this group’s vision of their potential role in the development of Thai-Chinese relations, some respondents supposed that the relationship could benefit from individual efforts, especially in areas such as international business and diplomacy. A prominent example was given by respondent T who stated “Studying in China has made me understand China more. Especially in diplomacy since we understand each other more, it could emphasize a feeling of connection more”. Another comprehensive answer was given by respondent D who shared her view that studying in China provides opportunities to foster relationships in multiple facets such as education, trade, and tourism. It plays a role in maintaining the longstanding positive relations between nations. Furthermore, it contributes to the dissemination of knowledge and enhances mutual understanding, facilitating the exchange and spread of culture among the younger generations.

In conclusion, the findings from this group of Thai students emphasize the profound impact of developing personal relationships with Chinese nationals on their worldview. These relationships served as powerful agents of change, dispelling stereotypes and misconceptions and fostering a deeper understanding of Chinese culture and society. The intercultural learning fostered by these personal relationships played a key role in broadening their worldviews and promoting intercultural understanding.

In addition, education in China has had a significant impact on the personal development of Thai students in this group. It has improved their language skills, exposed them to a diverse educational and social environment, and fostered personal growth and adaptability. These students show strong career aspirations, all wanting to work with or in China, recognizing the value of international experience and language skills in shaping their future, as well as an attachment to China after their experience in the country.

Their perceptions of Sino-Thai relations were positively influenced by their educational experiences in China, which promoted favorable views and emphasized the role of language and cultural understanding in strengthening bilateral relations, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, personal learning experiences, applied skills, and personal relationships have had a profound impact on this group of Thai students, resulting in improved outlook, personal development, and more positive perceptions of the China-Thailand relationship.

#### **Group 2 (2-4 years)**

Interviews with Thai students who completed 2 to 4 years of higher education in China provided valuable information about the transformation of their worldview through personal relationships with Chinese citizens. Prior to their experiences in China, some respondents acknowledged that they had preconceived notions about China shaped by external factors such as media portrayals and generalizations. However, their interactions with Chinese friends led to a profound re-evaluation of their perceptions.

#### *Impact of Developing Personal Relationships with Chinese Citizens on Thai Students' Worldview:*

One notable result was the gradual breaking down of stereotypes associated with China. Thai students stated that their interactions with Chinese friends made them realize the diversity and complexity of Chinese society. They realized that China is not a monolithic entity but a nation with a rich diversity of cultural, social, and political views. For example, respondent O shared that he had made many Chinese friends in China, and his friends had explained many stories about China to him, which made him more familiar with China. The interviewee added that he used to think that Chinese people spoke loudly in public places, which he thought was very impolite behavior.

However, as he gradually became acquainted with Chinese people, he realized that this was their way of expressing enthusiasm rather than impolite. Another respondent A shared that previously he discussed politics with his Chinese friends. He noted that most of his friends tended to believe what the government persuaded or commanded, as many people generally trust the majority opinion. Additionally, this interviewee shared “It (communication with Chinese people) influenced my opinion. Now I do understand why they have different opinions than me. For example, the conflict between China and Taiwan. I had deep conversations with my friends to understand their point of view”.

The interviews revealed a shift toward a more nuanced view of China. Respondents emphasized the importance of not making harsh judgments about the country as a whole based on limited information. They were able to appreciate the diversity of Chinese culture and society, moving away from simplistic judgments. A prominent response was given by respondent N who broadly explained that her attitude had changed over time. She pointed out that many people tend to have negative perceptions of China and Chinese people based on an overall perspective. However, the speaker believed that after engaging in conversations with many Chinese people, the attitudes of many would change as well. The speaker emphasized that Chinese people are not inherently evil, just as Thai people and people in other countries are not. It was said, “Just because we consume media and see only one side of information. Getting to know or talk with Chinese people made me feel that in the future I shouldn't make decisions based on hearsay or media”.

Another interesting feedback was provided by interviewee R, who shared that communication with her Chinese friends had a significant influence on her. She expressed, “Chinese people who have lived in China since birth know their own country very well. My communication with them feels like they are sharing a part of being Chinese with me. It has helped me get to know China very well”.

Thai students shared their experience in gaining insight into Chinese traditions, customs, and reasons for certain cultural practices. According to respondents this cultural exchange went beyond textbooks and provided a better understanding of the Chinese way of life. For example, respondent O said “I think Chinese friends can help me better understand Chinese culture. Chinese friends are very enthusiastic about

answering all the questions that cannot be answered in books or without live conversation, it helps me gain more knowledge”.

One of the main insights of interviews with this group is re-evaluating preconceived notions about China was accompanied by personal growth. Thai students described how this process of reappraisal promoted a more open outlook. Their experiences in China challenged their cognitive biases and fostered an appreciation for the richness of human diversity. Respondent R regarding the question of understanding China without personal communication with Chinese people said “I personally never had a misunderstanding because I have always had Chinese friends who made my life in China more easy. My friends encouraged me never to stop learning about China’s identity”.

*Influence of Education in China on Thai Students’ Personal Development:*

Absolutely all respondents consistently acknowledged that Chinese universities and society provide a highly competitive environment. This competitiveness has served as a motivating factor, pushing Thai students to achieve academic success. This motivated them to work harder and strive for academic success. Additionally, Thai students viewed their educational experiences in China as intellectually enriching. Exposure to diverse academic perspectives and rigorous academic programs broadened their intellectual horizons, providing them with a globalized education that extended beyond textbooks and classrooms.

Respondent N shared “The society there made me a lot more diligent. I used to study without intention or do things without enthusiasm. But in China, due to the high competition, I saw that Chinese people are very diligent and it changed me too. Living in China for me is not just living. It includes self-development and gaining a growth mindset.” Another respondent answering the question about the impact of university and society on personal growth said “It is very effective. China is a very competitive country for studying. Since we came to study in China, it made us have to develop ourselves even more”.

The experience of living and studying in a foreign country was characterized as transformational. It required adapting to a different culture, facing new challenges, and developing a global perspective holistically. Thai students realized the immense value of an international presence for their personal development. Interview

O stated “After coming to China for a period of time, my knowledge and experience have been enriched through studying and living in China, which has been helpful for my growth. However, social activities in China are completely different from those in Thailand. We, Thai students, participate in many social activities and part-time jobs during our university years, which is very helpful for personal growth. However, this is something that I lack in Chin, but I adapted to it”.

Respondents expressed a desire to continue their studies and careers in China, highlighting the long-term impact of their educational experiences on their future plans. The desire to return to China for postgraduate studies and employment underscored the enduring impact of their time in the country. The majority of respondents expressed their desire to continue subsequent studies or work in China upon graduation. For example, a comprehensive response from respondent R whose goal for the future was to study and find a job in China. She mentioned her intention to establish a family and settle down in China. Respondents clarified that they did not imply that Thailand is an unfavorable place. On the contrary, they expressed a strong desire to take advantage of better opportunities should they arise in China. They also expressed their aspirations for personal and family development in the future. Respondents believed that such opportunities could be achieved by studying or working in China rather than returning to Thailand.

*Perceptions of the China-Thailand Relationship as a Result of Studying in China:*

The interviews explored Thai students’ views on China-Thailand relations, with respondents in this group mainly emphasizing economic ties, cultural exchanges, and challenges and opportunities.

Respondents in this group recognized the strong economic relationship between China and Thailand. China’s significant investment in Thai business, trade, and the booming tourism sector was recognized as a key driver of Thailand’s economic growth. This economic interdependence was perceived as mutually beneficial, contributing to the economic prosperity of both countries. For example, respondent A mentioned that China and Thailand have a strong diplomatic relationship with multiple areas of support. China has offered economic assistance, with numerous Chinese companies and industries operating in Thailand. Additionally, there is a significant

Chinese immigrant presence in Thai cities, contributing to a blending of Chinese and Thai cultures through their traditions and ceremonies.

The interviews revealed that Chinese traditions, culture, and ceremonies were integrated into Thai society. Chinese immigrants, cultural centers, and businesses have enriched Thailand's cultural landscape. The result was a blending of Chinese and Thai cultural elements, promoting cross-cultural understanding and understanding. Interviewees J, R, and O describe Sino-Thai relations as “中泰一家亲” or in its English version as “Chinese and Thai people share one-family love”. Respondent R said that the relationship between Thailand and China is characterized as a brotherly relationship. She said “This strong connection has ancient origins, dating back to the days of trade in goods. Over time, Chinese businesses have frequently operated in Thailand, and a lot of Thai individuals have pursued education in China, further solidifying the close ties between the two nations.” Regarding the change in perception, most of the respondents acknowledged the inevitability of change due to personal experiences and evolving perspectives, the speakers remained highly optimistic that any future alterations in the relationship will be for the better.

While recognizing the economic benefits, one of the Thai students in this group also expressed concern about China's growing influence in Thailand. They cited Chinese-owned enterprises and the potential for resource exploitation as problems requiring careful management. The need to ensure that Thai businesses can compete on a level playing field was emphasized. Respondent N broadly discussed this aspect of Sino-Thai relations. She expressed that an increase in the number of Thai people studying in China leads to a greater influence of China on Thailand. From a Chinese perspective, this is viewed as advantageous, given China's strengths. However, from a Thai viewpoint, it is considered detrimental, as it results in increased interest in China and a noticeable rise in Chinese influence, particularly in areas like cuisine, products, construction, and business ownership in Thailand.

All respondents emphasized the importance of maintaining a positive relationship with China while effectively addressing potential problems. They recognized the importance of cooperation and mutual understanding as fundamental to managing the complex dynamics of Sino-Thai relations. Speaking about their own



opportunity to improve relations between China and Thailand after completing their studies, all respondents in the group responded affirmatively, emphasizing linguistic and cultural awareness that contributes to the understanding of intercultural dialogue. For example, respondent O said, “After graduation, I plan to return to Thailand to work in the education industry, hoping to help more Thai people understand China and deepen the friendship between Thailand and China.” Or respondent R who views the presence of Chinese students studying in Thai universities and vice versa as a positive influence on strengthening the ties between Thailand and China. It was said that “educational exchange facilitates language and cultural sharing, ultimately benefiting the economies of both countries”. Most speakers believe that this arrangement is a valuable support for Thai-Chinese relations, potentially yielding benefits in areas such as international communication, the economy, and employment opportunities.

In conclusion of this analysis of this group, the author can state that Thai students who studied in China for 2-4 years experienced a transformational shift in their worldview. Their interactions with Chinese nationals shattered stereotypes, leading to a more nuanced understanding of China’s diversity. These relationships also stimulated personal growth, challenged cognitive biases, and fostered open-mindedness. The competitive academic environment motivated academic excellence and broadened their intellectual horizons. Life in a foreign country was seen as transformative. Many students expressed a desire to continue their studies and careers in China, emphasizing the enduring impact of their educational experience.

Regarding China-Thailand relations, students noted strong economic ties and cultural exchange. However, only one was concerned about China’s growing influence in Thailand, but absolutely all emphasized the necessity of cooperation and mutual understanding as the way forward. Overall, their experiences in China led to a significant loyalty and warm perception of China thus facilitating a strong desire to strengthen ties between the two countries.

### **Group 3 (over 4 years)**

Based on the responses of the respondents in Group 3, who have studied in China for over 4 years, the author can draw several insights regarding the impact of developing personal relationships with Chinese citizens during Thai students’ studies

and how this education in China affects their worldview, personal development, and perceptions of the relationship between China and Thailand.

*Impact of Developing Personal Relationships with Chinese Citizens on Thai Students' Worldview:*

A prime example is the perspective of interviewee B, who has undergone significant changes during the process of communicating with Chinese people. Before arriving in China, she had preconceived notions about the country. She said, "Before I came to China, I had the impression that China was an oppressive communist regime similar to North Korea". However, her interactions with Chinese people fundamentally changed her view. She was struck by the warmth, sincerity, and hospitality of the Chinese people. As Respondent B articulated, "I have developed a very positive yet balanced opinion of China". This transformation, from skepticism to appreciation, showcases the profound influence of personal relationships on Thai students' worldviews.

Another participant, respondent C, mentioned a significant change in her attitudes after interacting with Chinese acquaintances. In particular, she highlighted the common stereotype that Chinese people tend to deceive foreigners. However, they discovered through personal interactions that the Chinese were sincere and honest, which dispelled misconceptions. The experience of interviewee C highlights the potential of personal relationships to challenge and modify deeply held prejudices, leading to a more informed perspective.

Another speaker L, admitted that he had limited understanding and various misconceptions about China, which were partly influenced by the prevailing negative attitudes towards the Chinese in Thailand due to problems associated with "gray Chinese business". She stressed the need for a sensitive approach to addressing these issues and emphasized the importance of seeking a more comprehensive perspective by considering the perspectives of other countries. The respondent also emphasized the role of critical analysis of media consumption to better understand complex issues. The respondent confirmed that she came to this conclusion after deep communication with Chinese friends, who brought her up to date with Chinese point of view.

In sum, the absolute majority of respondents firmly confirmed that Chinese people at least somehow improved and expanded their understanding of China. A

generalized answer was given by respondent I who stated “Getting to know and interact well with Chinese friends and Chinese people in China has definitely influenced my opinion about China”.

*Influence of Education in China on Thai Students’ Personal Development:*

The responses suggest that education in China has had a positive impact on Thai students’ personal development and growth. Learning a third language, gaining business knowledge, and improving time management and self-reliance were some of the reported outcomes.

Respondent G mentioned that his education in China fostered self-reliance and enhanced time management skills, crucial attributes in a fast-paced society. He noted that the international student community’s exposure to diverse experiences and interactions with foreign friends encouraged social growth. This implies that the educational environment in China not only imparts academic knowledge but also nurtures valuable life skills and personal development.

In addition, respondent C said that studying in China had a huge impact on her personal development, providing the opportunity to master the Chinese language. This development goes beyond language skills and includes personality traits such as maturity and courage. They emphasized the importance of going outside of your comfort zone and participating in various activities with foreign friends. This personal growth allows Thai students to confidently navigate and adapt to a globalized world.

An interesting example is the aspiration of respondent H, who shared her thoughts about her personal development and its impact on her plans for the future. She expressed her vision for the future by stating, “When I graduate, I plan to teach at schools and Confucius Institutes in my hometown to pass on Chinese language knowledge to Thai people in the future.” In addition, it provides the possibility of offering online training to students from other less-developed provinces. In the long term, she is considering setting up her own Chinese language teaching institute. In sum, all respondents confirmed a strong impact of their education in China on their career, life, and personal development. Additionally, most of the respondents mentioned their intention to connect their future life with China, Chinese business/organizations abroad, or the Chinese language.

*Perceptions of the China-Thailand Relationship as a Result of Studying in China:*

While respondents generally perceived China and Thailand as good friends, there were also mentions of issues regarding the treatment of Thai students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This suggests that while the overall perception of relations between the two countries remained positive, specific instances could negatively affect Thai students' experiences. For example, respondent B shared that China and Thailand have a strong friendship, but there were concerns that China did not treat Thai students well during the COVID-19 pandemic. Later this respondent expressed her wish saying "China could improve on treating people under their care equally".

It is worth noting that the remaining respondents refrain from critical comments. respondents C, G, H, I, P, Q, and S express predominantly optimistic views regarding China-Thailand relations. They emphasize the existence of historical, cultural, and economic ties that have strengthened these diplomatic bonds. Their perceptions encompass a broader spectrum, from economics and diplomacy to people-to-people connections. For example, respondent I stated "Relations between the two countries have been close since ancient times. Visits were exchanged at all levels. It is a relationship that has been fruitful for both countries in strengthening mutual trust".

The impact of studying in China on respondents' perceptions of Sino-Thai relations appears mostly positive, but personal experience or force majeure may be present. For example, Respondent B presents a nuanced view, identifying a mix of negative and positive aspects. Whilst recognizing that some aspects of relations have improved, such as educational opportunities, the respondent is at the same time concerned about the treatment of Thai students during the pandemic. This emphasizes that soft power is not static and can be influenced by personal experiences, such as the challenges faced by Thai students in China during critical periods.

Conversely, respondent L experienced a markedly positive shift in how she perceived China-Thailand relations. She attributes this change to the educational opportunities provided by China and the subsequent improvement in diplomatic interactions between the two countries. This shows that educational diplomacy can play an important role in the fostering of a positive view of international relations.

Respondents G, H, and S report that their views have remained relatively stable. Their educational experiences have confirmed or reinforced their pre-existing favorable impressions. This suggests that in these cases the educational experiences did not significantly change pre-existing views, but rather reinforced their positive perceptions of Sino-Thai relations. In addition, respondents P and Q report an improvement in their prospects after receiving education in China. Respondents P and Q report an improvement in their prospects after receiving education in China.

There were different responses to the impact of education in China on Thai-Chinese relations. Respondent B suggests that education may not have a positive impact due to students' personal experiences. Such skepticism highlights the intricacies of education diplomacy and how soft power can be tested in challenging circumstances. It underlines the need for institutions to manage crises in a way that does not affect the wider relationship and the wider Thai student population.

In contrast, interviewee C emphasizes that education in China enhances Thai-Chinese relations through cultural exchange, language skills, and opportunities for cooperation. This illustrates how educational diplomacy can promote intercultural understanding and enable economic and diplomatic cooperation. Respondents G, H, and S emphasize the positive effects of educational diplomacy, particularly through reciprocal student exchanges that provide students with scholarships and job prospects. According to respondents, these results help to strengthen the relationship between the two countries. This shows that educational diplomacy can have a tangible impact on relations between nations.

Furthermore, respondent I emphasized the potential of educational diplomacy in improving Thai-Chinese relations, highlighting the importance of scholarship opportunities for Thai students as evidence of the strength of the bilateral relationship. This is an example of how educational opportunities can be a concrete expression of diplomatic goodwill and at the same time an effective tool for the promotion of China's soft power. Finally, respondents P and Q are optimistic about the potential of education to strengthen the relationship between Thailand and China. They believe that it could lead to a deeper and longer-lasting partnership. They suggest that educational diplomacy offers an opportunity for sustained cooperation, creating links between individuals and organizations that go beyond individual encounters.

The research findings reveal that Thai students who have studied in China for more than four years significantly alter their perspectives through cultivating personal connections with Chinese citizens. It involves a shift from preconceived notions to more constructive and impartial viewpoints, which, in turn, disprove misunderstandings and promote a more knowledgeable outlook. Furthermore, Chinese education has a positive impact on the personal development of Thai students. It fosters self-reliance, time management skills, and enhances language proficiency, often leading to a desire for future connections with China. Additionally, although most respondents view China and Thailand as good friends, personal experiences, including challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, can affect their perceptions. Overall, this group highlights the ever-changing nature of soft power and the significance of education and personal connections in shaping attitudes towards China and the Sino-Thai relationship.

### **Findings of 3 groups**

This comprehensive study of this section sheds light on the multifaceted influence of personal relationships, education, and diplomatic perceptions. An intriguing trend emerges that confirms previously put forward hypotheses - different susceptibility to Chinese soft power - students who have spent a longer time in China demonstrate increased susceptibility to this influence.

#### *Impact of Developing Personal Relationships with Chinese Citizens on Thai Students' Worldview:*

The results of this study highlight the transformative power of personal relationships with Chinese citizens. These relationships serve as catalysts for changing the mindset of Thai students. As the length of their education in China increases, so does their receptivity to Chinese soft power.

Regardless of the length of time respondents stay in China, interaction with Chinese citizens is critical to changing their views. These relationships act as transformative agents, challenging preconceived notions and stereotypes and promoting intercultural understanding. Thai students who are exposed to various aspects of Chinese society through these relationships often move from skepticism to a more nuanced understanding. They recognize the complexity and diversity of Chinese culture and move away from simplistic judgments and stereotypes. This shift highlights

the power of personal relationships in facilitating cross-cultural exchange and promoting soft power. Clearly, students who have spent more time in China are more receptive to Chinese soft power.

Personal growth is another recurring outcome as Thai students go through a process of self-discovery and openness. This personal development, stimulated by their interactions, goes beyond the acquisition of academic knowledge and language skills. Thai students describe how their experiences in China challenge cognitive biases and promote an understanding of the richness of human diversity, thereby leading to a more accepting understanding of Chinese values and actions.

*Influence of Education in China on Thai Students' Personal Development:*

The educational aspect of Thai students' stay in China has a significant impact on their personal development. Interestingly, students who have spent more time in China tend to be more receptive to Chinese soft power. They emphasize different aspects of growth facilitated by their education in China.

The competitive academic environment at Chinese universities plays a motivational role in encouraging Thai students to strive for academic excellence. This helps develop qualities such as self-confidence and time management skills, which are invaluable in a fast-paced society. In addition, exposing the international student community to diverse academic perspectives broadens their intellectual horizons and provides them with a globalized education that goes beyond textbooks and classrooms.

This transformative aspect of living and studying abroad is not limited to academics. Thai students place particular emphasis on acquiring life skills, including adaptability and a global perspective. They describe their experiences in China as crucial to their personal growth, encouraging them to navigate and adapt confidently in a globally interconnected world. These qualities are more pronounced among students who have spent more time in China, highlighting a heightened sensitivity to Chinese soft power.

Moreover, there is a clear tendency among Thai students to continue their relationship with China after completing their studies. They express a desire to return for further study or to pursue career opportunities in or with China, highlighting the lasting impact of their education in China on their future plans. This commitment to

continuing ties with China, especially in the professional sphere, reflects their growing receptivity to Chinese soft power.

*Perceptions of the China-Thailand Relationship as a Result of Studying in China:*

Perceptions of Sino-Thai relations shaped by Thai students' educational experiences in China are overwhelmingly positive. However, the narratives presented in this section reveal nuances in these perceptions that may be influenced by personal experiences. Again, the length of their education in China plays a role in the depth of their receptivity to Chinese soft power.

While the general consensus points to the strong and historic friendship between China and Thailand, some Thai students have expressed concern about specific incidents such as the treatment of Thai students during the COVID-19 pandemic. These examples highlight the complex structure of soft power, where personal experiences can influence broader perceptions. In particular, students who have spent more time in China tend to have a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of Sino-Thai relations, covering both their positive aspects and potential problems.

The study highlights the importance of problem-solving and maintaining cooperation and mutually beneficial relationships. Thai students emphasize the importance of cultural exchange, language skills, and opportunities for cooperation in strengthening diplomatic ties. They express a desire to contribute to this relationship by emphasizing the role of educational diplomacy in promoting intercultural understanding and facilitating economic and diplomatic cooperation. Longer periods of study in China foster a deeper understanding of the complexities of diplomatic relations, which further contributes to their receptiveness to Chinese soft power.

In conclusion, the findings of this section provide a comprehensive understanding of the profound influence of personal relationships and educational experiences on the perspectives of Thai students studying in China. It becomes increasingly clear that students who have spent longer periods of time in China tend to be more receptive to Chinese soft power. These students often express a strong desire to continue their relationship with China, both in terms of further study and career opportunities, highlighting the lasting impact of their educational experiences on their future careers and broader diplomatic relations between the two countries. This nuanced



understanding of the impact of Chinese soft power on Thai students can inform diplomatic strategies and international education policies.

#### **4.5 Shortcoming of Thai Students' Life in China**

##### **Group 1 - Students who spent 1-2 years in China**

A common theme among Thai students who spent 1-2 years in China was the severe language barriers they faced. These problems can be divided into two main aspects. First, they encountered difficulties when trying to communicate with Chinese people who did not speak Mandarin Chinese. Secondly, they encountered difficulties interacting with native Chinese speakers, including university teachers who spoke regional dialects. These linguistic barriers were seen as barriers to effective academic communication and social integration.

Several Thai students in this group emphasized that not having a Chinese ID card was a significant obstacle in their studies and experience in China. Respondent T conveyed a perception that China's policies towards foreign students are less accommodating, exemplified by the prohibition on renting public bicycles without a Chinese ID card. Respondent U explained that they experienced an initial inconvenience due to disparities between their home country and China, particularly regarding the requirement to use a Chinese ID card for a variety of applications. In addition, respondent K highlighted a consistent demand for signing in using a Chinese ID card number which sometimes obstructs access to certain Chinese applications.

Respondents of this group consistently cited the lack of extracurricular activities outside of their academic responsibilities as a notable shortcoming. These students felt the lack of opportunities for interaction and engagement outside of the classroom affected their overall impression of China.

In addition to language challenges, the study also highlighted the personal aspect of cultural adjustment experienced by Thai students when living and studying in China. This cultural adaptation was notably reflected in their food preferences, as students often missed their native cuisine and faced difficulties with the long-term consumption of only Chinese food. Furthermore, issues related to accommodation arose, primarily stemming from differences in roommates' lifestyles and schedules. It

should be stated that such cultural aspects appear to be more individual in nature and not directly aligned with the study's primary scope, thus cannot be considered as drawbacks of China's soft power.

### **Group 2 - Students who spent 2-4 years in China**

Respondents A and J expressed concern about teaching standards in Chinese universities. They emphasized the lack of practical knowledge acquisition despite adequate coverage of the theoretical aspect of education. In addition, insufficient knowledge of English among teachers was identified as a serious problem. Interviewee J answering the question about the quality of teaching at her university said "Not good as I expected it to be, most of the professors' English proficiency level below standard of teaching". Respondent A also emphasized, "They speak half Chinese and half English. That is a lack of qualification". Furthermore, these respondents conveyed their dissatisfaction with the quality of educational materials and poor organization of the educational process, highlighting the shortcomings in effectively satisfying the needs of foreign students.

Opinions about the quality of the office for international students were divided into satisfactory and unsatisfactory. Respondents A and J's feedback suggested inefficiencies within the international student office at Chinese universities. The inability to promptly resolve student concerns and a perceived lack of support presented a challenge. Respondent J stated, "The international student's office is working inefficiently, and some teachers are not on the same page with each other furthermore split the group chat even though their work needs to be incorporated". Respondent A's statement "They often lack work. When I go to consult my issue with them, they will throw the issue to another department instead of explaining to me and finding solutions". In contrast, the rest of the respondents in this group expressed satisfaction or even appreciation for the work of their offices.

A recurrent theme among several respondents (A, J, N, O) was the presence of language barriers. These barriers included difficulties in understanding various Chinese dialects and limited proficiency in spoken Chinese. However, this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this study and cannot be determined when proposing recommendations.

### **Group 3 - Students who spent over 4 years in China**

In the area of pedagogy, it is noteworthy that most respondents, especially respondents B, G, L, S, and P, expressed a primary sense of satisfaction with the quality of teaching provided by Chinese teachers. Recognition of the professors' pedagogical expertise was a recurring theme. However, almost all respondents of this group expressed their extreme disappointment in their international students' office. A prominent example is respondent B's affirmation revealed a particular aspect of concern. This respondent's experience was highlighted by problems arising from the lack of appropriate organization of academic life. Respondent B answering the question about obstacles of living and studying in China said "There were plenty, but most of them relate to poor organization in the international student office.

Another example is respondent S who said "The university management is not very satisfying for me. Some teachers neglected their students, replied late, and solved problems not in time as a result". According to respondents while the overall standard of teaching seems acceptable in many cases, the syllabus raises some issues regarding the consistency of the curriculum and guidance for international students.

Conversely, respondents C and Q reported more positive views of the effectiveness of international student offices. However, mixed reviews in this dimension highlight significant differences in administrative systems among Chinese institutions. These results confirm the relevance of the previously mentioned "China's tier system" as a determinant of the potential quality of universities in lower-tier cities. Consequently, students who choose to study in lower-tier cities may indeed face greater challenges, including potential difficulties with the quality of their international student offices, which was expressed by respondents of this group and previously mentioned.

It is worth noting that respondents in this group were extremely enthusiastic in giving recommendations to the author of the study. Thus, respondents stated that encouraging Thai students through scholarship programs remains the cornerstone of the recommendation, as highlighted by the experience of respondent B. The mentioned interviewee stated "Scholarship will be the most effective way to attract more Thai students. Take me as an example; I did not have a good impression of China nor its culture until I actually got to live here".

Some respondents suggested that China should step up efforts to increase the recognition of its universities through popular social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. In addition, others suggested that China should focus on promoting its language courses, culture, and short-term programs at Thai schools, especially as some students have already had positive experiences with these offerings. As part of the respondents' recommendations, it was also suggested the introduction of work visas for Thai graduates. Notably, respondents in this group emerged as genuine facilitators of China's soft power promotion, as evidenced by their interest in expanding China's opportunities for Chinese influence in Thailand's education sector.

### **Findings**

The conclusion of this section has shed light on the primary drawbacks of utilizing Chinese soft power via higher education exchange programs for Thai students, with findings from three distinct groups of students who spent varying durations in China. These drawbacks encompassed a range of issues related to language barriers, challenges with the Chinese ID card, limitations in extracurricular activities, and concerns about the quality of teaching and support services. Cultural adaptation and individual experiences also played a role in students' perceptions but were not directly linked to China's soft power.

Group 1, comprising students who spent 1-2 years in China, faced considerable language-related issues, particularly in effectively communicating with non-Mandarin Chinese speakers and native Chinese speakers who spoke regional dialects. Moreover, administrative barriers stemming from the need for a Chinese ID card caused significant inconvenience, hindering students' daily activities. Moreover, students' general perception of China was negatively affected by the absence of extracurricular activities beyond academic responsibilities.

Group 2, comprising students who stayed in China for 2-4 years, expressed apprehensions about the quality of education, particularly highlighting the lack of practical skills acquisition despite sufficient theoretical teaching. Furthermore, educators' inadequate English proficiency and substandard teaching materials aggravated the already existing challenges. The efficiency and consistency of international student offices have been a topic of debate.

Group 3, consisting of students who spent more than 4 years in China, revealed satisfaction regarding the standard of teaching, yet expressed severe dissatisfaction with the international student offices. Particularly, issues regarding the organization within these offices were prominent. Whilst the quality of teaching was generally satisfactory, there were concerns expressed regarding the consistency of the curriculum and the level of guidance provided to international students.

Notably, a considerable number of students, particularly those in Group 3, displayed a heightened willingness to offer suggestions. Recommendations from the respondents included the importance of scholarship programs to attract more Thai students, as scholarships were seen as a key motivator for their positive experiences in China. Suggestions were made to increase the representation of Chinese universities via social media platforms and to encourage language courses, cultural programs, and short-term educational opportunities at Thai institutions. In addition, the implementation of work visas for Thai graduates was proposed to boost China's attractiveness.

Interestingly these findings indicate that respondents from Tier 3 Chinese cities were notably more critical in their assessment of the quality of education and services in their respective universities. This dimension underscores the influence of geographical location on students' perceptions. Compared to their counterparts in Tier 1 cities, these students expressed more substantial concerns about faculty proficiency, educational quality, and the efficiency of international student support services.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 5.1 Conclusion

The study explored the motivations of Thai students who chose to continue their education in China, shedding light on the key factors influencing their decisions and offering valuable insights into China's soft power strategies in the context of Thai student mobility.

Cultural immersion emerged as a dominant theme, with nine respondents highlighting their deep interest in Chinese culture, traditions and history as a key motivator. Their stories demonstrate a strong desire to delve into the richness of Chinese heritage, often sparked by early exposure through family ties or personal experience. Notably, participation in short-term cultural programmes, especially summer camps, played a crucial role in shaping their aspirations.

The attractiveness of language learning was another important motivator cited by eight respondents. Their views emphasized the practical value of Chinese language proficiency, which was seen as an advantage for obtaining a high-paying job or improving career prospects. Interestingly, while some saw language as inseparable from cultural understanding, others saw it as a separate motivator, driven by career aspirations or the growing global dominance of Mandarin.

Beyond these central themes, various additional factors emerged as motivators. The prospect of experiencing a foreign lifestyle, a new culture, and even experiencing life in a non-native climate. A number of respondents recognized the influence of Chinese media content, citing popular TV shows, celebrities and entertainment as catalysts for their interest in the country and its culture. Moreover, China's rapid economic development and technological advances resonated with some students, encouraging them to view the country as a dynamic and promising environment for their academic and professional endeavors.

This study highlights the multifaceted nature of Thai students' motivations in choosing China as a study destination. While cultural immersion and language

learning emerged as the most common drivers, the interplay of personal interests, career aspirations and exposure to China's soft power initiatives, especially short-term cultural programmes, contributed to a wide range of factors influencing their decisions. These results highlight the effectiveness of Chinese public diplomacy efforts to attract Thai students and provide valuable insights into the complex interplay of cultural exchange, language learning and socio-economic factors shaping student mobility trends in the region.

The majority of Thai students in this study had positive impressions of China before starting their studies. These positive views were shaped by factors such as the country's cultural attractiveness, economic development, delicious cuisine, and the perception of the Chinese people as hardworking and patriotic people. Media portrayals and recommendations from teachers and peers also played a role in shaping this perception. Only one respondent reported being neutral or even pessimistic, primarily influenced by negative media coverage.

Thai students receive information about studying in China through various channels, including personal research, educational exhibitions and social media. However, educational institutions such as high schools and Confucius Institutes play a critical role in providing guidance and support. Thai teachers at Chinese language schools and Chinese nationals at Confucius Institutes often recommend education in China to their students and even guide them in choosing universities, scholarships and programs.

The level of language and culture knowledge among Thai students before their studies in China varied significantly. Some students, especially those with family ties (Chinese ethnicity), demonstrate a high level of language proficiency and cultural knowledge due to family background or previous formal education in Thai schools where Chinese is taught. Others have limited understanding gained through self-study, media consumption, or interaction with the Chinese community such as Chinese tourists or family businesses in China. However, others begin their studies without any prior knowledge, relying on the immersive experience of learning a language and culture.

It is noteworthy that 18 out of 21 Thai students had ever received financial assistance for their education from the Chinese side, however, three students chose

academic prestige or a desirable city of study over financial assistance. This challenges the assumption that scholarships are the sole motivator, opening up opportunities for research into the relationship between university prestige and China's soft power, as well as understanding diverse student motivations to better attract and support international students.

*The effectiveness of China's soft power through higher educational exchange with Thailand*

This study successfully addressed the first objective of my research, which was to determine the impact of China's higher education programs on Thai students and their perception of China's soft power.

Documentary results and interviews indicate that China has the potential to enhance its soft power through university programs for Thai students. Triangulation of these findings provides a comprehensive view of the educational programs offered to Thai students in China, revealing a multifaceted picture that encompasses personal relationships, educational experiences, perceptions of Sino-Thai relations, as well as the conception and implementation of Chinese soft power. The vast majority of those interviewed reported that they have developed more positive sentiments toward China, embracing all aspects of China's policies, culture, and people, despite encountering academic and social challenges. This firsthand experience, regardless of the duration of their studies in China, can significantly enhance their understanding of the Chinese language, culture, people, policies, and society, which would have been otherwise unattainable. However, this study has also confirmed that students who stayed in China for a more extended period exhibited greater receptiveness toward Chinese cultural, political, and social elements, thus affirming the hypothesis that receptiveness to Chinese soft power increases over time.

For first-year students, exposure to China often induces a positive shift in perceptions. Direct experience dispels preconceived notions as immersion in Chinese culture and society challenges stereotypes. Students appreciate the convenience, safety and rapid development of China emphasizing the impact of everyday life experiences. While views of China as a world leader vary, recognition of its growing importance on the world stage remains consistent. Notably, understanding the Chinese language, culture and society becomes crucial in overcoming prejudices and misconceptions.



With longer stays (2-4 years), a deeper transformation takes place. First impressions develop into more subtle and positive perspectives shaped by factors such as increased interaction with Chinese society and some integration into Chinese realities. Familiarity with the Chinese system of administration and its efficiency contributes to an understanding of its development model. At the same time, there is a growing awareness of China's global role, recognising its contribution and potential as a leading power. The emphasis on cultural understanding and language proficiency reinforces their importance in forming accurate opinions and eliminating misunderstandings.

For students who have spent more than 4 years in China, the change in perception becomes even more pronounced. There is a shift from platitudes about China to an informed view, largely driven by direct interaction and personal experience, which provides a deep understanding of Chinese life and the dynamics of governmental power as well as social power. While views on the development model remain varied, some recognize the role of government in progress. However, there is a general recognition of China's growing influence and its potential to become a leading power through rapid economic and technological progress. Notably, this group emphasizes the importance of continuous learning and ongoing cultural immersion to better understand China's complexities to avoid potential friction between China and Thailand.

A major theme emerging from this study is the undeniable impact of the length of students' immersion in Chinese society on their receptivity to Chinese soft power. This primary finding underscores how the duration of students' stay in China correlates with the depth of their immersion, ultimately leading to a transformation in their worldview. As Thai students extend their stay, personal relationships emerge as powerful catalysts for dispelling skepticism and misconceptions. Time spent cultivating relationships in China fosters cross-cultural understanding, resulting in a more balanced, informed, and accepting perspective. Consequently, Thai students undergo a transformation from initial fears and stereotypes to a more Sinocentric understanding of various aspects of Chinese culture, the system, politics, and society. Thus, hypothesis 1 and 2 is supported by the empirical data collected in the framework of this study.

While the study suggests an increased sensitivity to Chinese soft power with longer stays, it also reveals the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon. Personal

relationships act as catalysts for change, challenging preconceptions and fostering cross-cultural understanding. This personal growth goes beyond academic field to include self-knowledge, adaptability, and a global perspective. Competitive educational environments foster skills such as self-confidence and time management, while diverse academic perspectives broaden intellectual horizons as well as reshape priority systems.

The influential role of personal relationships in facilitating intercultural exchange and the utilization of soft power should not be underestimated. The 3rd hypothesis was validated by the findings of this research, emphasizing the pivotal role of personal relationships in shaping Thai students' attitudes toward China and their comprehension of Chinese politics. The narratives and experiences shared by Thai students consistently highlight the transformative power of these relationships, particularly with Chinese citizens. These connections serve as bridges for transcending preconceived notions, fostering intercultural understanding, and nurturing a more positive attitude. Thai students who have engaged in personal relationships with Chinese citizens, irrespective of the duration of their stay, exhibit a deeper understanding of Chinese politics. This enhanced understanding is intricately linked to their positive attitudes towards China, marking a pivotal contribution to the strengthening of China's soft power, as suggested by hypothesis 3.

While individual experiences are highly positive, Thai students form nuanced perspectives on Sino-Thai relations. Recognizing the strong historical friendship, some students express concern about specific incidents. This emphasizes the complex nature of soft power, where personal relationships influence wider views and perceptions of events. Notably, students with longer stays have a more comprehensive understanding of relationships, encompassing both positive aspects and potential problems. They emphasize the importance of problem solving, cooperation and mutually beneficial relationships, advocating cultural exchange, language skills development and collaboration to strengthen diplomatic ties.

Along with other results, this study resoundingly affirms hypothesis 4, emphasizing the transformative power of language proficiency and cultural understanding in shaping Thai students' attitudes toward China. Students who have mastered the Chinese language, along with a comprehensive understanding of culture, society, and values, exhibit a more positive attitude toward China. This positive

attitude, nurtured through their linguistic and cultural proficiency, serves as a robust contributor to the enhancement of China's soft power. Their appreciation of the complexity and diversity of Chinese culture, society, and values underscores the profound impact of these factors on the receptivity to Chinese soft power. This was especially evident when contrasting students who spent up to two years in China and students living in China for more than 4 years.

It is worth noting that Thai students often experience personal growth during their stay in China, extending beyond the mere acquisition of academic and linguistic knowledge. This growth includes an enhancement of personal traits such as self-assurance, adaptability, improved time management skills, and a broader global perspective. Thai students attest to the profound transformative influence of their immersion in China. These experiences challenge individuals' cognitive biases and enhance their understanding of human diversity, thereby promoting the assimilation of Chinese values and behaviors. The aforementioned features are more pronounced among students who have spent an extended period in China, underscoring their increased receptivity to Chinese soft power.

An important aspect of Thai students' experiences in China is the educational dimension. Chinese universities provide a competitive academic environment that motivates Thai students to strive for academic excellence, enhancing their self-confidence and effective time management skills. Moreover, exposure to a diverse international student community broadens their intellectual horizons, imparting a globalized education that transcends conventional textbooks and classrooms. Additionally, students emphasize the importance of acquiring life skills, adaptability, and a global outlook, all of which are essential for navigating an increasingly interconnected world. These attributes are particularly evident among students with prolonged stays in China, affirming their heightened susceptibility to Chinese soft power.

The findings from my interviews and documentary studies, demonstrate a trend of Thai students' strong inclination to maintain their connection with China after graduation. Thai students express their interest in pursuing further studies or careers within or related to China, reflecting a growing proximity to Chinese soft power due to the influence of their educational experiences on their future career plans.

The positive perception of Sino-Thai relations is significantly influenced by interviewees' educational experiences. They highlight the longstanding and historic friendship between China and Thailand, emphasizing the importance of the historical, cultural, and economic ties that have strengthened these diplomatic relations. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that personal encounters, such as the challenges faced by Thai students during critical periods like the COVID-19 pandemic, can introduce subtle variations into these perceptions. Students with extended stays in China exhibit a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of Sino-Thai relations, encompassing both the positive aspects and potential challenges.

*Drawbacks of China's soft power through higher educational exchange with Thailand*

This study not only assessed the effectiveness of Chinese soft power through higher education exchange in Thailand but also accomplished the second objective of identifying the major shortcomings of China's soft power through higher education exchange in relation to Thailand.

One of the primary challenges to China's soft power advancement via higher education exchanges with Thailand is its failure to establish a significant presence and engagement with the Thai public, specifically prospective international students. On well-known social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram, the majority of Chinese universities have minimal activity, and, in most instances, they are entirely absent. This impedes their capacity to engage with Thai students, consequently constraining their ability to display a positive image of their university and China as a whole.

The limited range of academic opportunities has a detrimental effect on the promotion of Chinese soft power, primarily due to the narrow range of academic disciplines provided to Thai international students by Chinese universities. The strong emphasis on areas such as linguistics, teaching, medicine, and economics significantly limits the variety of academic offerings available to Thai students. Consequently, this factor limits their ability to explore a wider range of academic fields, hindering their prospects for interdisciplinary learning and career diversification. This limitation, in turn, reduces the attractiveness and influence of Chinese higher education, thereby

hindering the successful projection of Chinese soft power in the field of international education.

Students who spent 2-4 years in China expressed concern about the lack of knowledge of the English language by some teachers created communication problems for students studying in English or during their language courses, which further hindered the effective transfer of knowledge. Interestingly, the effectiveness and consistency of international student offices has been a point of contention, with varying experiences highlighting the possible need to streamline processes and ensure consistent support across institutions.

The lack of English proficiency among university instructors in China poses a significant challenge to the advancement of Chinese soft power through higher educational exchanges. This issue, often cited as a major disadvantage encountered by Thai students in China, obstructs effective communication and adversely affects their academic achievements. Thus, it reduces the attractiveness of Chinese higher education institutions and undermines China's ability to project soft power within the field of international education.

Students who spent more than four years in China presented a mixed perception. While they expressed satisfaction with the overall quality of teaching, they expressed deep dissatisfaction with the work of the international student offices. Disorganization and perceived inefficiency in these offices caused frustration and hampered their ability to cope with daily life and academic tasks. This dissonance between positive experiences with faculty and negative interactions with support services highlights the need for a holistic approach to student well-being.

The international student offices responsible for the assistance and management of Thai students in China exhibit mixed effectiveness, with some students receiving prompt assistance while others encounter frustration due to inefficiencies. This inconsistent support system can leave students feeling unsupported and neglected, potentially leading to a negative perception of China's commitment to the well-being of Thai students during their studies.

For students who spent 1-2 years in China, the language barrier became a serious obstacle. Difficulties communicating with non-Mandarin speakers and knowledge of regional dialects hampered their ability to communicate with locals and

integrate into the cultural fabric. However, this factor does not correlate with soft power but is more of a temporary obstacle. While there were significant barriers that already tended to influence perceptions, the requirement for a Chinese ID created an unexpected administrative barrier, creating inconvenience in daily life and potentially impairing the sense of belonging. Notably, the lack of extracurricular activities beyond academic responsibilities created a sense of alienation in their overall experience, limiting opportunities for broader cultural immersion and increasing feelings of isolation.

The limitations of cultural activities for Thai students within Chinese universities bear noteworthy implications for China's soft power. To encourage a deeper comprehension of Chinese society and culture among Thai students, it is essential to enhance cultural immersion opportunities. Such limitations may result in a lack of cultural immersion and interaction, diminishing the prospect for Thai students to broaden their knowledge of Chinese society and culture. Secondly, extracurricular activities frequently offer international students a chance to establish friendships and create social connections. The absence of such opportunities could obstruct social integration and trigger feelings of isolation among Thai students. Hence, it is vital to address this constraint to improve Thai students' general perception of China.

The Chinese ID requirement presents a significant obstacle to Thai students, creating complexity in their daily and academic routines as they heavily depend on it to benefit from government services and the use of local apps/systems. The involved administrative procedure, which can be particularly bothersome for Thai students, may cause exasperation and interfere with their overall stay in China. Simplifying administrative procedures, especially within the university ecosystems, is crucial for the effective integration of Thai students. Ineffective processes can create an unfavorable impression that has the potential to discourage prospective students and damage China's overall image.

It should be noted that the most experienced group of students despite some concerns have shown a remarkable willingness to offer solutions. Notably, scholarships have become a key factor in attracting Thai students and creating a positive experience. Additionally, recommendations included increasing the visibility of Chinese universities on social media, promoting language courses and cultural programs at Thai institutions, and introducing work visas for graduates to facilitate career opportunities.

These insightful suggestions provide a valuable basis for improving the experience of Thai students and enhancing the effectiveness of China's soft power efforts.

It is important to confirm that, students from Third-Tier Chinese cities were significantly more critical in their assessments of the quality of education and services. This fact highlights the influence of geographic location on students' perceptions, suggesting that existing differences in resource allocation and infrastructure development within China's "multi-tier system" may influence the overall student experience. Urban third-level universities may face challenges in attracting and retaining qualified teachers, leading to concerns about English proficiency and the quality of teaching. Additionally, international student offices at these institutions may lack the resources and expertise to provide the same level of support as their counterparts in Tier 1 cities where universities are relatively high graded. These regional imbalances require careful consideration in program design and resource allocation, ensuring that students in all locations have access to high-quality educational experiences.

## **5.2 Recommendations**

In addition to the previous objectives, the author also addressed the third objective by formulating recommendations for the Chinese authorities to improve their soft power strategy in Thailand.

The effective promotion of China's soft power through higher education exchange with Thailand depends on addressing several key issues. These include the lack of a significant presence and engagement with the Thai public, a limited range of academic opportunities, insufficient English proficiency among university professors, inconsistent support provided by international student offices, limited cultural immersion opportunities, complex administrative procedures, and limited availability of scholarship and financial aid programs for Thai students.

To improve Chinese universities' online presence in foreign social media, Chinese universities should consider developing and maintaining a strong presence on popular social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. They can strategically showcase aspects of student life, international student success stories, and

cultural events to attract more Thai applicants. At the same time, the university must continuously update its content in both Chinese and English to provide potential Thai students with a comprehensive understanding of its offerings and broader Chinese culture.

To change the situation with the limited range of academic opportunities (majors) offered by Chinese universities to Thai international students, it is suggested that the academic disciplines offered be diversified. This can be achieved by expanding program offerings in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, arts, politics and humanities. Additionally, Chinese universities should encourage interdisciplinary learning and promote research collaborations to attract Thai students interested in a wider range of academic fields.

To bridge the language proficiency gap among university professors, Chinese universities should invest in English language training for teachers and support staff. This will ensure higher levels of communication and teaching competence among teachers, promoting effective communication and learning for Thai students. Chinese universities should promote the use of English in teaching materials and lectures, particularly in programs designed for foreign students or language courses. Another important aspect is the provision of modern manuals for studying not only specialized subjects but especially the Chinese language for language students.

Inconsistent support from international student offices can create issues for Thai students studying in China. To address this significant obstacle, Chinese universities should establish a standardized and optimized service system across all institutions. International students should receive consistent support and have their common concerns addressed smoothly, rather than relying solely on the professionalism of each international student office. Additionally, universities should establish transparent communication channels and guide students on important issues such as visa applications, medical care, the university ecosystem, accommodation, and local services.

Limited opportunities for cultural immersion can hinder China's soft power advancement. To enhance cultural and social understanding among Thai students, Chinese universities should expand cultural immersion opportunities by organizing cultural events, language exchange programs, and intercultural workshops.



Additionally, universities should include activities, and students' clubs that satisfy the interests of Thai students, promoting social integration and intercultural interaction with their Chinese classmates. Encouraging Thai students to participate in Chinese cultural activities and engage with local communities through sports, arts, volunteering, and cultural clubs can enhance their cultural understanding.

Simplifying administrative procedures can make life easier for Thai students by reducing bureaucracy and increasing efficiency. This includes streamlining visa applications, simplifying registration processes, medical checkups and providing clear guidance on administrative matters. Furthermore, universities should offer Thai students thorough assistance and support throughout administrative procedures to reduce frustration and inconvenience.

Expanding scholarship and financial aid programs for Thai students can make Chinese higher education more accessible and attractive. These programs must be widely public and inclusive to promote student academic mobility and diversity. Chinese universities can attract a wider range of Thai students by targeting specific areas of interest and providing scholarships for different academic levels. Furthermore, universities ought to contemplate offering financial assistance options, such as tuition fee waivers, reduced living costs, and scholarships, to enhance the accessibility of Chinese higher education to Thai students.

By addressing the mentioned issues, Chinese universities can effectively promote their soft power through higher education exchanges with Thailand. Chinese universities can attract more Thai students and promote positive perceptions, China's credibility, and long-term development of bilateral relations with Thailand by expanding their online presence, diversifying academic offerings, improving language proficiency among staff, strengthening international student administration, enhancing cultural immersion and intercultural opportunities, simplifying administrative procedures, and expanding scholarship opportunities.

*Short-term language-cultural programs for the enhancement of China's soft power*

Documentary and interview results demonstrated the high effectiveness of short-term cultural and language programs for Thai adolescents in promoting Chinese public diplomacy and soft power. First, these programs provide Thai youth with a

meaningful and exciting introduction to Chinese culture, society, development, and history. This approach can help to nullify stereotypes and even develop a positive perception of China. By providing Thai youngsters with a Sinocentric view of China, they can gain a stance favoring China's strategic outlook. In addition, short-term cultural and language programs allow Thai youth to interact with Chinese people of different backgrounds, promoting mutual understanding and respect. Third, previous program participants often act as promoters of China's soft power in Thailand, sharing their positive experiences with others, encouraging Thai students to study in China, and supporting China's projects such Belt and Road Initiative.

Based on the findings, this study confirms that cultural and language programs for Thai students are an effective and efficient tool for strengthening Chinese public diplomacy and soft power, with significant implications for bilateral relations. By supporting these programs, China can strengthen its public diplomacy and soft power in Thailand, as well as gain a number of special and noteworthy benefits.

*Thai teachers of Mandarin and Confucius Institutes for the enhancement of China's soft power in Thailand*

China's strategy to enhance its soft power in Thailand has been highly effective, as evidenced by the results of this study. This method includes educational and linguistic initiatives, exemplified by sponsoring professional training courses in China for Thai teachers of Chinese and supporting the efforts of Confucius Institutes. These efforts not only promote Chinese language and culture but also increase understanding of China's educational opportunities, thereby strengthening China's influence in Thailand.

Confucius Institutes play a crucial role in promoting China's "soft power" in Thailand by serving as cultural and educational centers. These institutes offer Thai students a variety of resources to engage with China. They provide extensive assistance to individuals wishing to pursue higher education in China, helping them with the application process, selecting suitable universities and academic programs, and guiding them through the application process to Chinese institutions.

Chinese language teachers in Thai schools have a significant impact on the promotion of Chinese education among Thai youth. Their focus is not only on teaching language proficiency but also on emphasizing the importance of Chinese language

skills for future career opportunities. A significant number of these teachers have personal ties with China, gained through study at Chinese universities or exchange programs provided by Chinese authorities. Their first-hand experience allows them to effectively guide their students by sharing their own positive experiences with China. In addition, these Thai teachers help their students prepare for the HSK exam, which is a requirement for scholarships and advanced studies in China. This position makes them important intermediaries between pupils, Confucius Institutes, and Chinese universities, acting as a comprehensive educational guide for potential Thai students.

Confucius Institutes and local Thai Chinese language teachers are an integral part of China's soft power strategy in Thailand, providing invaluable guidance, facilitating access to academic and life opportunities in China, and promoting linguistic and cultural education. As a result, the opportunity to study in China is becoming more attractive and feasible for Thai students. This partnership underscores China's success in advancing its soft power goals through the use of local Thai intermediaries in the education system, ultimately strengthening educational and cultural ties between Thailand and China, therefore shaping the favorable perception of China among the general public.

#### *More than just academics*

The results of my research show that a large majority of Thai students seek to stay in China for their careers or additional degrees, believing that the country offers more promising job prospects and a better quality of life than Thailand. To capitalize on their language and other skills, some Thai students take part-time jobs in international trade while continuing their studies, although this practice is not usually allowed with student visas. Many of these students have been actively involved with the Thai embassy, consulates, and other Thai organizations in China while continuing their education. In addition, some have gained experience working with Chinese companies seeking to expand their presence in the Thai market. Regardless of academic background and interests, a career in trade and translation remains the top choice among Thai students in China.

However, the expansion of soft power for Sino-Thai enterprises and individuals goes beyond trade and translation. China's visa policy, which limits career opportunities for Thai students in China, may also limit China's ability to project soft

power. Judging from my interactions with Thai students, those who have a favorable opinion of China tend to be open-minded and culturally-politically aware. To assist these Thai students in realizing their full potential, the Chinese government can create opportunities that allow them to stay and work in China in fields beyond trade and translation (in fields that go beyond China's migration controls). This, in turn, will require improving the quality of university programs, teaching materials, and language skills of teachers, so that these students remain competitive with their Chinese counterparts. Conversely, China can also work with the Thai government and individual organizations to create career opportunities for students who want to return home.

The growing recognition of Chinese internet influencers such as bloggers, singers, and actors has contributed to a more favorable perception of China among the Thai population. However, these achievements have not been reflected in traditional Chinese media platforms operating in Thailand. The limited influence and presence of conventional Chinese media in Thailand is due to factors such as social barriers between the two regimes and differences in conceptual frameworks that do not always coincide with the views of Thai audiences. This difference leads to ineffective projection of the intended image, and sometimes plays into the hands of the negative image of China presented in Western media and actively promoted discourses to Thai audiences.

To address these challenges, it is critical that China recognizes the importance of its discursive power in shaping a positive image as a mediator between countries and people, promoting universal interests and benefits in the Thai media. The author of this study argues that increasing the effectiveness of Chinese media can be achieved by providing career assistance to Thai students studying relevant fields of study and participating in efforts to improve the perception of China in Thailand. It is also worth attracting more Thai students into relevant fields of journalism, which would contribute to the cultivation of Sinocentric journalists and potential influencers in both conventional media and new media.

In addition, Chinese media reporting about Thailand is often inconsistent and lacks originality, sometimes perpetuating negative stereotypes about the objectivity and quality of Chinese media. This trend can prompt the Thai public to seek alternative perspectives on domestic issues from Western media. Thai students studying in China

can act as mediators, conveying their views on these issues to Chinese audiences who may be largely unfamiliar with the region and its issues. The media has the potential to enhance political trust between the two countries, but China has to take active measures to increase its discursive influence.

Thai students studying in China can have a positive impact on the future of Sino-Thai relations. The Chinese government has invested heavily in their university education, but it is also extremely important to formulate a comprehensive strategy for interacting with Thai graduates of Chinese universities in the long term. To make full use of this resource, China should involve them in its “soft power” initiatives through various channels. Thai students often work as individual entrepreneurs or translators of their own choice or because of limited alternative opportunities. This may mean the need for more opportunities and support in their professional pursuits.

### **5.3 Limitations and Future Studies**

Concerning the limitations identified in this study, the author notes the sample size and its representativeness. Although the study included documentary analysis and interviews with 21 Thai students in China, it is acknowledged that the sample size may not fully reflect the diversity of opinions, particularly concerning the influence of place of study on perceptions of China and its soft power. This study revealed significant variations in perceptions and satisfaction regarding the standard of education in less developed cities (Tier 3) of China, in comparison to student satisfaction in the most developed cities (Tier 1).

It is important to note that the author of this study encountered significant methodological constraints, which prevented the use of quantitative analysis through a questionnaire. The Chinese government’s zero-tolerance policy towards COVID-19, which was in effect from 2020 until almost the end of 2022, led to restrictions on offline learning opportunities for international students located outside of China. International students were not allowed to travel to China to continue their full-time studies. Therefore, the number of Thai students studying offline in China was very limited, which prevented quantitative analysis from meeting the main and key criteria of this

study. These criteria include studying in China offline for different periods, ranging from 1 to more than 6 years.

A limitation of this study, in a broader context, is the limited number of actors that can contribute to the findings of the study. The study focused on the perceptions and experiences of Thai students in higher educational institutions in China. However, the study did not consider the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as Chinese or Thai experts, and Thai and Chinese government officials. Including their perspectives would provide a more complete understanding of China's soft power dynamics in Thailand, which is essential to achieving a broader understanding of the phenomenon.

To capture a wider range of Thai students' views and experiences, future studies should significantly increase the sample size from the current 21 respondents. Quantitative research such as questionnaires can enable researchers to explore the subtleties of factors that affect student perceptions, such as the impact of study location, socioeconomic background, and individual experiences. This can lead to greater accuracy in studies and the ability to make statistical comparisons. Quantitative analysis enables researchers to identify patterns and relationships between participants' perceptions and experiences, resulting in a more objective and generalizable understanding of these phenomena.

In addition to the views of Thai students, future research could also consider the views of other stakeholders involved in China's soft power efforts in Thailand. Interested parties or knowledgeable actors including Chinese and Thai experts, Chinese university professors, Thai-Chinese government officials involved in education or politics, and other representatives of educational institutions involved in the education of Thai students in China, such as the Confucius Institutes.

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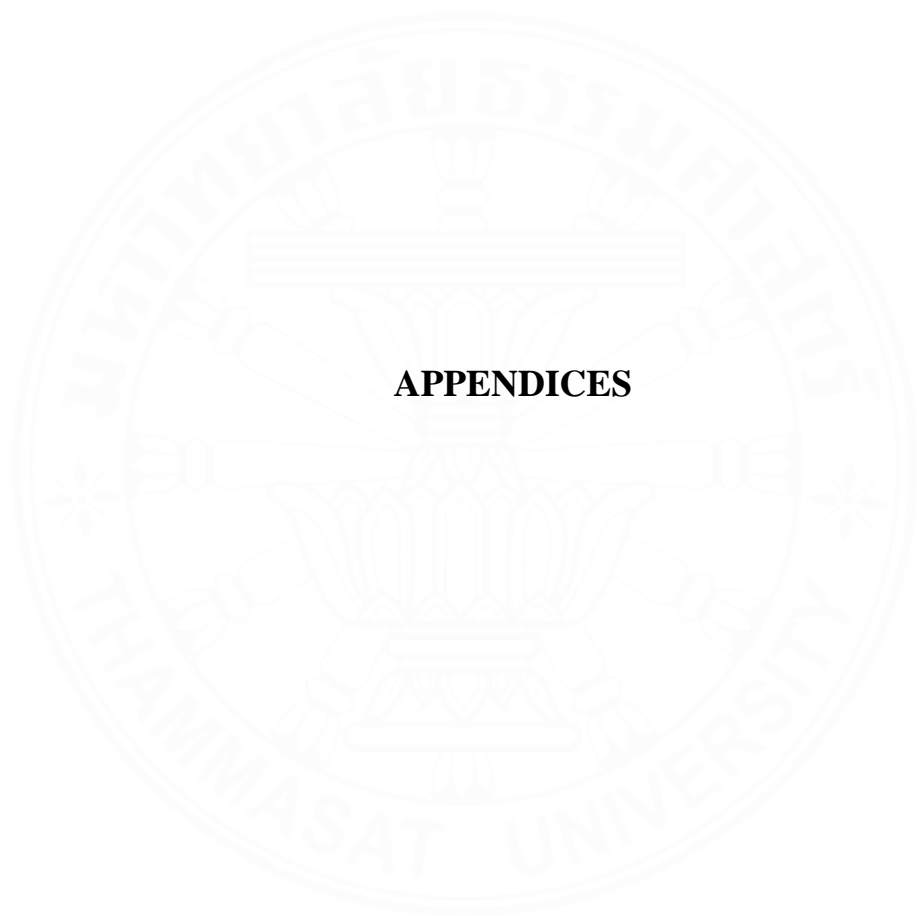
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**APPENDICES**

## Interview Questions for Thai Students in China

(1) How does China's higher educational programs influence Thai students in enhancing China's soft power in Thailand?

1.1 Introductory questions:

1. How long have you been studying in China (in total)?
2. What academic degree are you currently pursuing ? (If this isn't your first degree in China, could you please mention your previous one ?)
3. Which university are you enrolled in?
4. What is your major?
5. What stimulated you to study in China?
6. How did you hear/know about the opportunity to study in China?
7. What was your knowledge of the Chinese language, culture, society before you started your studies?
8. Have you ever studied at the Confucius Institute in Thailand?
9. What was your impression/feelings of China before you started your degree?
10. Have you ever received a scholarship/funding from China's government/University/ Confucius Institute?

1.1.1 How does the duration of studying in China influence the views of Thai students regarding domestic policy and development model of China?

1.1.2 How does the duration of studying in China influence the views of Thai students regarding foreign policy of China?

1. Has your opinion changed compared to the previous one after certain time in China?
2. What reasons changed your impression of China?
3. What is your current impression of China's development model and policy (domestic/foreign)?
4. How do you assess the role of China in the development of the region or the world?
5. Do you think that China is or should be the world's leading power?

- 1.1.3 How do knowledge of the language, culture and society of China affect the consent and support of China's policy and development model by Thai students?
1. Has knowledge of the Chinese language, culture, society influenced your worldview and understanding of China ?
  2. Has a deeper knowledge of the Chinese language, culture, values and society influenced your opinion about China ?
  3. Has a deeper knowledge of the Chinese language, culture, values and society influenced your understanding of China's policy and development model?
  4. Do you think that the opinion about China can be erroneous / incorrect due to lack of knowledge about the language, culture, values, society of China?
  5. Do you think that you used to understand China less or misunderstood it because you did not know Chinese language, society or culture before?
  6. Do you think that after mastering the language, culture, values, society of China, you can understand better the Chinese development model and policy?
- 1.2 How does developing personal relationships with Chinese citizens during Thai students' studies affect the worldview of Thai students?
1. Has your worldview/thinking changed after communicating with your Chinese friends/people?
  2. Has your interaction with Chinese friends/people affected your opinion of China?
  3. Do you think that you used to understand China less or wrong because you didn't communicate with Chinese friends/people and couldn't discuss some issues with them?
  4. Do you feel that your Chinese friends/people have somehow improved your understanding and opinion of China?
- 1.3 How do Thai students' personal development and growth get influenced by receiving education in China?
1. How has your education in China affected your personal development?

2. Have your university, society, friends in China influenced your personal growth?
  3. Assess the role of your education in China on personal development, future plans, career, etc.?
  4. Are you considering your career or continuing your studies in China or prefer another country?
- 1.4 How does receiving education in China affect Thai students' perceptions of the relationship between China and Thailand?
1. How do you perceive China's relations with Thailand?
  2. Has your opinion about the relationship between China and Thailand changed after studying in China? (For example, it got better, worse, didn't change)
  3. Do you think receiving an education in China, helps the development of Thai-Chinese relations? In what way?
  4. Do you think getting an education in China influenced your opinion on the relationship between China and Thailand? In what way?
- (2) What are the primary drawbacks of utilizing Chinese soft power via higher education exchange programs for Thai students?
1. How do you rate teaching at your university?
  2. How do you evaluate the work of the office of international students at your university?
  3. What obstacles did you face while studying in China?
  4. What obstacles did you face while living in China?
  5. What are the shortcomings of your education or life in China that can be improved?
- (3) What recommendations can be formulated for the Chinese authorities to enhance their soft power through higher education exchange in relation to Thailand?
1. How do you think to improve the life and study of Thai students in China and make education in China more attractive to Thais?
  2. Do you have any comments, additions and wishes related to previous questions?