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Academic and Cultural Challenges Faced by Chinese Students: A Case Study at a Christian University in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study investigated the academic and cultural challenges faced by Chinese international students at a Christian university in Thailand, examining their coping strategies and the influence of the institution's religious environment. Quantitative data from 65 students and qualitative interviews with 10 participants revealed moderate academic (M = 3.16) and cultural (M = 3.01) challenges, positively correlated (r = .598, p < .001). Key stressors involved English-medium instruction (EMI) barriers, unfamiliar pedagogical styles, and communication norms. Students navigated these hurdles through active, psychological, and behavioral coping mechanisms to build intercultural competence. Furthermore, the institutional Christian environment exhibited three distinct trajectories: facilitative support (spiritual safety and positive reframing), constraints (time burdens and inclusion barriers), and adaptive outcomes (pragmatic participation). The findings offer valuable insights for international higher education institutions seeking to optimize student support services, English Language Teaching (ELT) programs, and inclusive environments.

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INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education draws unprecedented numbers of Chinese students abroad, altering educational mobility in the Asia-Pacific region (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Thailand has gained prominence as a regional hub due to geographic proximity, lower costs, and expanding English-medium programs (Zheng et al., 2025; Rhein, 2018). A distinctive, under-researched sector within Thai higher education is represented by Christian international universities, where Western pedagogical models are interwoven with faith-based institutional practices and traditional Thai social norms (Xue et al., 2024). For Chinese students, this unique ecosystem presents dense adaptational demands, particularly concerning English Language Teaching (ELT) and English-Medium Instruction (EMI) environments (Heng, 2018; Quan et al., 2016).

Previous studies (e.g., Zhang & Goodson, 2011; Heng, 2018; Hsu, 2021) suggest that international students, particularly those from China, face distinct hurdles when transitioning to EMI universities, where English language proficiency is the primary determinant of successful academic literacy acquisition (Zhang & Goodson, 2011; Heng, 2018; Hsu, 2021). Students frequently struggle with comprehending English lectures, participating in discussions, and executing academic writing tasks due to persistent vocabulary gaps (Heng, 2018; Yuan, 2022). Furthermore, as Hyland (2006) emphasizes within English for Academic Purposes (EAP), Western writing conventions remain fundamentally unfamiliar to students from non-Western traditions.

This linguistic barrier is compounded by pedagogical shifts. Moving from a teacher-centered system to a participatory, discussion-based pedagogy challenges student within ELT frameworks (Quan et al., 2016; Chen & Starosta, 2000; Su, 2023). Students raised in the Chinese Gaokao tradition often struggle with expectations to express personal opinions in English and engage in collaborative learning (Heng, 2018; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). Quan et al.'s (2016) stage model maps this transition from initial confusion to competence, highlighting the need for targeted institutional support. In Thailand, Zheng et al. (2025) confirm that language difficulties drive high academic stress in EMI classrooms, while Rhein (2018) notes that universalistic models often overlook local, context-dependent pedagogical challenges.

Beyond the classroom, students navigate foreign social norms and lifestyle expectations (Ward et al., 2020; Berry, 1997). Berry's (1997) framework notes that intercultural contact triggers acculturative stress when discrepancies exist between heritage and host cultures, a strain intensified by concurrent academic demands in EMI settings (Berry et al., 2006). In Thailand, Chinese students encounter indirect communication patterns that contrast with their native habits, affecting verbal interactions in ELT spaces (Wenjing & Chayanuvat, 2024; Zhu, 2021). While proactive strategies—such as seeking English clarification—reduce culture shock (Worawong & Sukpat, 2024), severe symptoms like homesickness and isolation frequently occur (Xue et al., 2024; Ward et al., 2020). Some students respond through self-segregation, which temporarily eases anxiety but delays long-term language adaptation (Moore-Jones, 2021). Moreover, while sociocultural difficulties peak early and decline, psychological adjustment fluctuates, requiring sustained institutional support (Ward & Kennedy, 1999).

To manage cross-cultural and language-learning friction, students experience acute psychological tension (Smith & Khawaja, 2011) that heightens vulnerability to anxiety and

exhaustion during transitions (Huang, 2024; Wenjing & Chayanuvat, 2024; Lai et al., 2023). To mitigate this, students deploy multi-modal coping mechanisms (Bertram et al., 2014): active strategies like language immersion (Worawong & Sukpat, 2024), psychological reappraisal (Ward & Kennedy, 1999), and behavioral peer support, which serve as core predictors of resilience and language integration (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Bertram et al., 2014; Moore-Jones, 2021).

In faith-based institutions, the campus environment alters the traditional acculturation matrix (Berry, 1997; Xue et al., 2024). Here, "Faith/Religion" represents a student's engagement with the Christian environment, functioning as a double-edged sword split between positive coping and spiritual struggle (Pargament, 1997; Park et al., 2017). For Christian students, shared practices and chapel offer linguistic continuity and social validation (Ward et al., 2020; Pargament, 1997), utilizing prayer and spiritual reframing to view hardships as growth lessons (Pargament, 1997; Park et al., 2017; Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). Conversely, this environment can alienate secular or non-Christian students navigating EMI programs (Xue et al., 2024). Negative coping—such as spiritual discontent or perceived hypocrisy—aggravates distress (Pargament, 1997), often leading non-Christian students to adopt a superficial approach to satisfy rules (Xue et al., 2024; Park et al., 2017).

Research Gaps and Objectives

Current literature largely focuses on Western, secular settings, leaving Southeast Asian Christian universities unexamined regarding how secular students in EMI programs manage mandatory faith practices alongside academic literacy demands. Furthermore, research frequently isolates academic, cultural, and religious factors. This study addresses these gaps by exploring how faith-based environments function as a double-edged sword. Utilizing a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), this research investigates three questions:

1. What are the academic and cultural challenges that Chinese students face at a Christian international university in Thailand?
2. What relationships exist among academic challenges, cultural challenges, coping strategies, and the Christian environment?
3. How does the institutional Christian environment influence students' adaptation, stress levels, and coping processes?

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design, wherein quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and integrated during the interpretation phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This approach is utilized to provide a comprehensive understanding of complex research phenomena (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). By employing this design, the broad quantitative trends identified in the survey are enriched and contextualized by the deep, localized narratives of the participants.

Participants

The quantitative sample comprised 65 Chinese undergraduate students (44.4% male, 55.6% female) enrolled at a Christian international university in Thailand who completed an online

survey. Participants' academic standing spanned from years 1 to 5, with a substantial majority (81.5%) reporting no prior experience in an English-Medium Instruction (EMI) environment. In terms of residency, the participants' length of stay in Thailand varied: 22.2% had resided in the country for 1–2 years, more than half (55.6%) for 3–4 years, and the remaining 22.2% for 5 years or more.

To capture a broad spectrum of secular and faith-adherent orientations, the qualitative phase utilized purposive sampling to select ten Chinese international students (Participants A–J) representing diverse academic disciplines, lengths of residency, and religious backgrounds. The cohort's demographic composition was structurally stratified to contrast various worldviews: secular perspectives were represented by four non-affiliated Education majors (Participants A–D) and a Nursing major with a secular background (Participant I); emerging or culturally Buddhist perspectives were captured through two Management majors (Participants E and F); and Christian viewpoints were represented by two practicing Christians in English for Business (Participants G and H) alongside a committed Christian majoring in Theology (Participant J). This configuration allowed the study to examine multi-layered insights regarding the institutional Christian environment across distinct secular and faith-aligned standpoints.

Instruments

This study utilized a dual-approach instrumentation framework comprising a quantitative survey and a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. The quantitative instrument used a uniform 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree to capture demographic information and five distinct multi-item composite scales. To ensure quantitative rigor, internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficients for each scale:

Academic Challenges Scale (5 items; α = .83)
Cultural Challenges Scale (5 items; α = .81)
Coping Strategies Scale (5 items; α = .78)
Stress Problems Scale (5 items; α = .85)
Christian Environment/Faith Scale (5 items; α = .80)

All scales demonstrated high internal consistency, exceeding the established benchmark threshold of 70 for social science research. Concurrently, the qualitative phase utilized a semi-structured interview guide developed directly from the central research questions to explore participants' nuanced lived experiences regarding academic and cultural hurdles, coping mechanisms, and the institutional Christian environment. Interviews lasted 25 to 30 minutes each, were conducted in Mandarin to preserve emotional authenticity, and were translated into English for systematic content analysis.

Data Analysis Methods

Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26, through which descriptive statistics (mean scores and standard deviations), Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients, and regression analyses were executed. To evaluate students' agreement levels regarding academic challenges, cultural challenges,

coping strategies, and stress management, mean scores were interpreted using continuous score intervals derived from the 5-point Likert scale framework (see Table 1).

Table 1: Interpretation of Mean Scores

Score Range	Level of Agreement	Perception Level
4.21-5.00	Strongly Agree	Very High
3.41-4.20	Agree	High
2.61-3.40	Unsure	Average
1.81-2.60	Disagree	Low
1.00-1.80	Strongly Disagree	Very Low

Qualitative interview transcripts were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (QCA) following the systematic, rule-guided framework outlined by Schreier (2012) in NVivo 12 software, proceeding through coding frame construction, operational rule definition, pilot testing, and main segmentation. To enhance the credibility and dependability of the qualitative findings, inter-rater reliability procedures were employed to verify the coding process and theme identification. A co-researcher independently coded the same set of responses, and Cohen's Kappa coefficient was computed to measure the degree of agreement between the coders. The resulting coefficient of 0.85 demonstrated a high level of inter-rater agreement. Any differences in coding were subsequently discussed and reconciled until a consensus was achieved. Following Creswell and Plano Clark's (2017) convergent mixed-methods framework, data integration occurred during the interpretation phase through a side-by-side comparative approach. Quantitative statistical trends (e.g., mean severity rankings of language barriers and correlation matrices) and qualitative themes (e.g., nuanced narratives of pedagogical shock and spiritual friction) were merged and cross-validated. Specifically, qualitative findings were used to contextualize, explain, and elaborate upon the quantitative baseline trends, identifying points of convergence, divergence, and expansion regarding how the institutional Christian environment shapes student stress and coping processes.

FINDINGS

To answer Research Question 1 concerning the academic and cultural challenges faced by Chinese students at a Christian international university in Thailand, the quantitative findings are presented below and structured around specific analytical dimensions.

Academic Challenges

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for students' academic, ranked in descending order of severity. As shown in the table, the single most severe academic barrier reported by participants was English academic writing (M = 3.65, SD = 1.15), falling within the "agree" range and indicating a high level of difficulty. Conversely, the remaining items clustered around moderate to low thresholds. Difficulty understanding English-medium lectures (M = 3.39, SD = 1.11), general stress surrounding structural academic expectations (M = 3.35, SD = 0.99), and personal discomfort when speaking in class (M = 2.96, SD = 1.23) all fell into the 2.61 – 3.40 interval, reflecting an "unsure" or average

perception level. Finally, unfamiliarity with the host university's teaching and learning style recorded the lowest baseline endorsement (M = 2.59, SD = 1.19), falling within the "disagree" range and revealing a low perception of pedagogical challenge.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Academic Challenge Items, Ranked from Highest to Lowest Mean (N = 65)

Item	M	SD
I find academic writing (essays, reports) challenging.	3.65	1.15
I find it difficult to understand lectures delivered in English.	3.39	1.11
I feel stressed about meeting academic expectations.	3.35	0.99
I feel uncomfortable speaking or asking questions in class.	2.96	1.23
I am not used to the teaching and learning style at this university.	2.59	1.19

Cultural Challenges

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for students' sociocultural adjustment difficulties, ranked in descending order of severity.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Cultural Challenge Items, Ranked from Highest to Lowest Mean (N = 65)

Item	M	SD
I feel homesick or miss my familiar cultural environment.	3.39	1.34
I find communication styles here different from what I am used to.	3.02	1.04
I sometimes feel isolated from students of other cultures.	3.00	1.22
I find it difficult to express my opinions in multicultural settings.	2.93	1.23
I find it difficult to adapt to Thai or international campus culture.	2.39	1.30

As shown in Table 3, the highest-rated stressor was homesickness or missing a familiar cultural environment (M = 3.39, SD = 1.34). This item, along with encountering differing communication styles (M = 3.02, SD = 1.04), feeling culturally isolated on campus (M = 3.00, SD = 1.22), and experiencing difficulty with self-expression in multicultural settings (M = 2.93, SD = 1.23), fell within the 2.61 - 3.40 interval. This indicates that participants were "unsure" on average, experiencing these challenges at an average perception level. Conversely, adapting to Thai or international campus culture recorded the lowest difficulty (M = 2.39, SD = 1.30). Falling within the 1.81 - 2.60 score range, this corresponds to a level of "disagree", indicating a low perception level of challenge regarding direct institutional cultural adaptation.

Coping Strategies

The quantitative evaluation of coping strategies among the student cohort (N = 65) is presented in Table 4, which outlines the item-level descriptive statistics ranked in descending order of their mean scores.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Coping Strategy Items, Ranked from Highest to Lowest Mean (N = 65)

Item	M	SD
I try to manage stress through personal strategies (rest, hobbies, reflection).	4.06	0.78
I seek help from teachers when I have academic problems.	3.87	0.83
I seek help from friends or classmates when I have difficulties.	3.78	0.96
Over time, I feel I am gradually adjusting to university life.	3.78	0.81
I actively change my study methods to adapt to university learning.	3.70	0.82

As shown in Table 4, all evaluated strategies fell within the 3.41 - 4.20 interval, reflecting an overall level of "agree" and a high perception level. Independent psychological stress management (rest, hobbies, reflection) registered the highest endorsement (M = 4.06, SD = 0.78). This was followed by seeking help from teachers (M = 3.87, SD = 0.83) and peers (M = 3.78, SD = 0.96), a gradual subjective adjustment to university life (M = 3.78, SD = 0.81), and active modifications to personal study methods (M = 3.70, SD = 0.82).

Christian Environment and Faith Influence

The quantitative assessment of the institutional Christian environment and its spiritual influence on the student cohort (N = 65) is presented in Table 5, which outlines the item-level descriptive statistics arranged in descending order of their mean scores.

As illustrated in Table 5, the environment's positive influence on personal growth registered the highest endorsement (M = 4.24, SD = 1.00), falling within the 4.21 - 5.00 interval ("strongly agree" or very high perception level). Two items fell within the 3.41 - 4.20 interval, indicating a level of "agree" or high perception level: facilitating reflection on life values (M = 3.96, SD = 1.11) and feeling respected despite differing religious beliefs (M = 3.79, SD = 1.18). Conversely, the perceived novelty of campus religious activities (M = 2.80, SD = 1.32) fell into the 2.61 - 3.40 range, indicating participants were "unsure" or average perception level. Finally, feeling unsure how to respond to specific Christian practices registered the lowest score (M = 2.48, SD = 1.20), falling into the 1.81 - 2.60 threshold interval ("disagree") or low perception level.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for Christian Environment and Faith Influence Items, Ranked from Highest to Lowest Mean (N = 65)

Item	M	SD
The Christian atmosphere has had a positive influence on my personal growth.	4.24	1.00
The Christian environment has helped me reflect on my life or values.	3.96	1.11
I feel respected even if I have different religious beliefs.	3.79	1.18
Religious activities or values on campus are new to me.	2.80	1.32
I sometimes feel unsure how to respond to Christian practices (e.g., prayer, chapels).	2.58	1.20

To conduct a precise qualitative content analysis addressing Research Question 1 regarding academic and cultural challenges that Chinese students face, the findings were presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Qualitative Content Analysis Coding Frame Matrix: Academic and Cultural Challenges

Main Category	Sub-Category	Operational Coding Rule (Definition)	Exemplar Coding Unit (Quote Example)
Academic Challenges	Linguistic Strain (EMI Barrier)	Mentions of explicit English linguistic limits in writing, reading, or comprehension during academic tasks.	"The biggest challenge for me was the language... entering an environment where English was the primary language..." (Participant C)
	Pedagogical System Shock	Conflict between China's examination-oriented tradition and Western student-centered learning styles.	"In high school, most learning was based on modular exercises... which emphasized imitation rather than creativity." (Participant B)
	Citation Misalignment	Difficulties adapting to strict Western academic integrity, plagiarism definitions, and formatting standards (APA/MLA).	"Paraphrasing English sources is complex. Back home, we could copy-paste long textbook definitions if we cited the author" (Participant G)
	Peer Interaction Anxiety	Apprehension or avoidance of multicultural group work due to fear of communication failure or negative evaluation.	"During group work... I feel nervous that my slow English will drag the team down, so I usually just stay quiet and do the background work." (Participant F)
	Somatic & Physical Fatigue	Bodily fatigue, altered sleep patterns, or biological adjustments impairing classroom attention and academic performance.	"The stress of keeping up with lectures left me exhausted; I had severe difficulties staying awake in class..." (Participant A) "The change in diet made me physically sick at first, causing me to miss early morning classes." (Participant D)
	Critical Thinking & Dialectical Deficit	Difficulty generating independent critiques or participating in unstructured debates due to a background of rote learning.	"When the teacher asks for a personal critique... I freeze. We get used to memorize the correct answer, not to point out flaws..." (Participant I)
Cultural Challenges	Transnational Isolation & Homesickness	Emotional distress, homesickness, or psychological separation from other national cultures on campus.	"I have homesickness every time I travel back from my home country... It usually lasts for more than a week." (Participant B) "Being away from my family during traditional festivals makes me feel incredibly isolated here." (Participant H)

Table 6: Qualitative Content Analysis Coding … (continued)

Main Category	Sub-Category	Operational Coding Rule (Definition)	Exemplar Coding Unit (Quote Example)
	Intercultural Code Friction	Misunderstandings stemming from misinterpreting subtle non-verbal cues, colloquial expressions, or localized etiquette.	"In Asia, it is impolite to call someone... with only one finger, but someone from the West did that, and that caused misunderstanding." (Participant B) "Many classmates address each other as 'bro' or 'guys' which was unfamiliar and difficult for me to understand" (Participant E)
	Pragmatic Translation Breakdown	Literal translation failures of specific Chinese social etiquette or idioms when communicating with non-Chinese speakers.	"My attempt to thank a dormitory supervisor by saying 'Thank you for your hard work' [literal translation of xinkule] was met with total incomprehension." (Participant A)
	Spiritual/Ritual Alienation	Unfamiliarity, confusion, or behavioral uncertainty regarding compulsory or pervasive campus Christian practices (e.g., chapel attendance, prayer).	"Sitting in mandatory chapel services felt very foreign, and I didn't know when I was supposed to close my eyes or stand up." (Participant C) "When teachers began the class with a Christian prayer, I felt deeply unsure of how to look or respond respectfully without sharing the faith." (Participant H)
	Host-Country Societal Taboos	Anxiety or friction from adjusting to distinctive local Thai norms and physical taboos.	"I had to learn quickly that you never touch anyone on the head or point with your foot here in Thailand. It makes me very self-conscious" (Participant J)

To address Research Question 2 regarding the relationships among academic challenges (AC), cultural challenges (CC), coping strategies (CS), and the institutional Christian environment (CE), Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients (r) were computed using the composite scale scores. The descriptive statistics and resulting correlation matrix are comprehensive of the entire student cohort (N = 65), as detailed in Table 7.

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Key Composite Variables (N = 65)

Variable	M	SD	(AC)	(CC)	CS	CE
1. Academic Challenges (AC)	3.16	.82	-	.598**	-.272*	.421**
2. Cultural Challenges (CC)	3.01	.82		-	-.148	.443**
3. Coping Strategies (CS)	3.81	.58			-	.316*
4. Christian Environment (CE)	3.45	.65				-

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01.

As shown in Table 7, the analysis revealed several statistically significant associations: Academic and Cultural Challenges: A moderate, significant positive correlation emerged (r = .598, p < .01), indicating that heightened academic strain strongly co-occurs with cultural adjustment friction. Academic Challenges and Coping Strategies: A significant negative

correlation (r = -.272, p < .05) suggests that greater deployment of coping mechanisms is associated with lower perceived academic difficulties. Institutional Christian Environment: Perceptions of the Christian environment exhibited moderate, significant positive correlations across all dimensions: academic challenges (r = .421, p < .01), cultural challenges (r = .443, p < .01), and coping strategies (r = .316, p < .05). This indicates that students highly aware of the campus faith environment also report greater adjustment challenges and higher utilization of coping strategies. Conversely, the correlation between cultural challenges and coping strategies was negative but statistically non-significant (r = -.148, p > .05). This suggests individual coping mechanisms are effective against academic strain but may not directly alleviate broader cultural friction like homesickness, which may instead be mediated or buffered by institutional support systems.

To address Research Question 3 concerning how the institutional Christian environment influences student adaptation, stress levels, and coping processes, a qualitative content analysis was performed, with the resulting coding matrix presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Qualitative Content Analysis: Institutional Christian Environment Influences

Main Category	**Sub-Category**	**Operational Coding Rule (Definition)**	**Exemplar Coding Unit (Quote Example)**
Facilitative & Supportive Influences	Institutional Belonging & Continuity	Campus religious environment serving as a source of familiar comfort, identity preservation, and social integration.	"Compared to other aspects of my life, attending church was the only thing that felt the same as before, so it gave me a strong sense of belonging." (Participant B)
	Cognitive & Spiritual Reframing	Using Christian theological frameworks to reinterpret academic hardships or cultural stressors as growth opportunities.	"Every challenge that I encounter in my life is not a coincidence, but a lesson that He wants me to learn." (Participant C)
	Passive Buffering Affect	The ambient calm of the campus atmosphere indirectly reducing stress, irrespective of a student's personal faith.	"Even though I don't participate in the church services, just walking through the quiet campus or hearing the chapel music could lowers my anxiety levels." (Participant F)
	Altruistic Community & Peer Mutualism	Optimistic peer dynamics driven by Christian values, emphasizing selfless support and non-judgmental empathy	"The Christian students and staff are patient; even when my English fails, they express genuine kindness and help me navigate campus without judging me." (Participant I)
Constraining & Friction-Inducing Influences	Ethical Disillusionment & Resistance	Religious alienation stemming from perceived hypocritical gaps between doctrine and behavior.	"People often talked about God, but their actions did not always reflect what they preached" (Participant A)

Table 8. Qualitative Content Analysis: … (continued)

Main Category	Sub-Category	Operational Coding Rule (Definition)	Exemplar Coding Unit (Quote Example)
	Spiritual/Intellectual Dissatisfaction	Critiques of theological instruction quality and relevance, leading to decreased engagement.	"I soon became dissatisfied with the content of the sermons... I gradually lost motivation to participate." (Participant D)
	Pragmatic Time Burden	Mandatory religious activities competing with academic requirements for limited time and energy.	"Religious activities added a small amount of workload and time commitment, which slightly increased the academic pressure." (Participant E)
	Perceptive Inclusion Barrier	Non-Christian students experiencing social exclusion or peripheral status within active religious networks.	" It feels like the Christian students form tight-knit circles very quickly... which leaves non-believers like me feeling somewhat excluded" (Participant G)
	Temporal Orientation Rebalancing	Institutional and cultural values shifting students from future-anxiety toward a present-focused outlook.	" The broader Christian cultural atmosphere had taught me to enjoy life and focus on the present rather than constantly living for the future." (Participant J)
	Host-Country Societal Taboos	Anxiety or friction from adjusting to distinctive local Thai norms and physical taboos.	"I had to learn quickly that you never touch anyone on the head or point with your foot here in Thailand. It makes me very self-conscious" (Participant J)

DISCUSSION

Academic and Cultural Challenges

The mixed-methods findings provide a nuanced understanding of the primary academic and cultural hurdles encountered by Chinese students within a faith-based international institution in Thailand. Quantitatively, the English language barrier emerged as the dominant academic stressor, with academic writing (M = 3.65, SD = 1.15) and lecture comprehension (M = 3.39, SD = 1.11) registering the highest severity rankings. This aligns with research identifying language proficiency as the core stressor for international students transitioning to English-Medium Instruction (EMI) and English Language Teaching (ELT) environments (Heng, 2018; Lai et al., 2023). From an ELT perspective, the severe writing barrier underscores how foreign discourse conventions and vocabulary gaps impede structural academic literacy acquisition, validating Hyland's (2006) assertion that Western academic writing traditions present profound systemic obstacles to non-native speakers. Qualitatively, Participant C observed: "*The biggest challenge for me was the language... entering an environment where English was the primary language*". This linguistic barrier was structurally

compounded by Pedagogical System Shock (M = 2.59, SD 1.19). In EMI classrooms, students experienced acute cognitive dissonance when transitioning from China's teacher-centered, examination-focused traditions to interactive, student-centered frameworks (Quan et al., 2016). This pedagogical transition directly triggers classroom communication anxiety, as learners accustomed to rote memorization must suddenly voice personal critiques and participate in spontaneous English discussions.

Participant B noted that prior learning relied on "modular exercises... which emphasized imitation". Furthermore, classroom reticence was tied to discursive adjustments rather than a lack of critical capacity (Heng, 2018), as Participant I shared: "*We get used to memorize the correct answer, not to point out flaws*". Within an ELT context, this epistemic friction extends to Citation Misalignment; Participant G noted that adapting to strict plagiarism and paraphrasing rules was complex because "*Back home, we could copy-paste long textbook definitions if we cited the author*". Cumulatively, these language and pedagogical strains induced severe somatic & physical fatigue (M = 3.35, SD = 0.99), exemplified by Participant A, who reported that "*the stress of keeping up with lectures left me exhausted; I had severe difficulties staying awake in class*".

Socioculturally, homesickness (M = 3.39, SD = 1.34) was the most acute challenge, mirroring psychological distress documented among Chinese students in Thailand (Ward et al., 2020; Wenjing & Chayanuvat, 2024), aligning with Smith and Khawaja's (2011) framework. Participant B stated: "*I have homesickness every time I travel back*". This isolation was exacerbated by Intercultural Code Friction (M = 3.02, SD = 1.04) and Pragmatic Translation Breakdowns. Participant B recalled non-verbal friction: "*In Asia, it is impolite to call someone...with only one finger, but someone from the West did that*". Translation breakdowns occurred when Chinese politeness scripts failed abroad; Participant A's translation of xinkule ("Thank you for your hard work") to a supervisor met with "total incomprehension".

Crucially, this study extends standard acculturation models (Berry, 1997; Ward et al., 2020) by identifying Spiritual/Ritual Alienation as a localized institutional stressor. Campus religious expectations created behavioral confusion for secular students. Participant C reflected that "*sitting in mandatory chapel services felt very foreign*", while Participant H felt "*deeply unsure of how to look or respond respectfully*". Paired with host-country societal taboos (Participant J), these findings prove cultural challenges are multidimensional, spanning linguistic, national, and institutional religious boundaries.

The Interconnection of Challenges, Coping, and Environment

A central finding is the significant positive correlation between academic and cultural challenges (r = .598, p < .01), validating Berry's (1997) framework wherein academic and sociocultural adaptation are deeply interdependent. This aligns with Berry et al. (2006) and Smith and Khawaja (2011), proving that acculturative stress magnifies under simultaneous academic and cultural pressures. Language barriers in EMI settings do not exist in a vacuum; linguistic limitations concurrently impede classroom comprehension and obstruct the cross-cultural socialization needed to build peer support networks (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Rhein, 2018). This cyclic friction confirms that ELT programs and institutional support services must integrate language remediation with intercultural communication training (Heng, 2018; Rhein, 2018). Conversely, the significant negative correlation between academic challenges

and coping strategies (r = -.272, p < .05) confirms that active coping reduces academic strain, supporting the high resource-seeking behaviors outlined by Quan et al. (2016). However, the non-significant correlation between cultural challenges and coping (r = -.148, p > .05) suggests that localized individual strategies fail to directly alleviate macro-level cultural friction like homesickness, a decoupling that mirrors Ward et al.'s (2020) distinction between psychological coping and structural sociocultural adjustment.

This decoupling is explained by the institutional context. The Institutional Christian Environment (CE) exhibited moderate, significant positive correlations across all dimensions: academic challenges (r = .421, p < .01), cultural challenges (r = .443, p < .01), and coping strategies (r = .316, p < .05). This profile indicates that students facing the highest adjustment friction are also those most acutely aware of the campus faith environment. Rather than relying solely on independent coping, this relationship highlights how the institutional climate acts as an external structural buffer, shaping how students manage the cognitive loads of English-medium learning (Wenjing & Chayanuvat, 2024).

The Influence of the Institutional Christian Environment

The qualitative findings reveal that the institutional Christian environment is a complex, dual-force structural mechanism that exerts divergent effects on student adaptation, stress levels, and coping processes. This duality maps directly onto Pargament's (1997) "positive religious coping versus spiritual struggle" framework, demonstrating that a faith-based environment acts as a double-edged sword.

Facilitative and Supportive Influences

For students receptive to or practicing the faith, the campus provided vital psychological and social scaffolding. Through Institutional Belonging & Continuity, familiar religious spaces mitigated cultural disorientation, aligning with Xue et al.'s (2024) observation that a shared faith community offers essential structural stability. As Participant B shared, "*Compared to other aspects of my life, attending church was the only thing that felt the same as before, so it gave me a strong sense of belonging*". Furthermore, cognitive & spiritual reframing allowed students to utilize theological frameworks to depersonalize hardships and view them as constructive meaning-making lenses (Pargament, 1997; Park et al.,2017). Participant C exemplified this positive religious coping—which Ano and Vasconcelles (2005) link to enhanced psychological well-being—stating: " *Every challenge that I encounter in my life is not a coincidence, but a lesson that He wants me to learn*." Crucially, the environment yielded positive adaptive outcomes even for non-Christian students. Under a Passive Buffering Affect, the ambient campus calm served as an unintentional sanctuary; Participant F noted that simply walking through the quiet campus or hearing chapel music lowered anxiety levels. Additionally, Altruistic Community & Peer Mutualism generated safety, with Participant I observing that patient, non-judgmental staff and peers expressed genuine kindness despite language barriers. In an EMI learning environment, this compassionate peer network is vital; it directly alleviates the classroom communication anxiety and peer interaction anxiety that typically paralyze non-native English speakers during group tasks. These elements fostered "creative acculturation" (Berry et al., 2006; Zhu, 2021) and catalyzed a Temporal Orientation Rebalancing. Shifting away from future-anxiety, Participant J reflected that the broader atmosphere taught them to enjoy life and focus on the present.

Constraining and Friction-Inducing Influences

Conversely, the environment induced significant friction when students perceived an epistemic mismatch or hypocrisy. Ethical Disillusionment & Resistance emerged when students noticed gaps between theology and behavior, igniting spiritual struggles that worsened distress (Pargament, 1997; Park et al.,2017). Participant A expressed this disenchantment, noting: *"People often talked about God, but their actions did not always reflect what they preached."* This friction was exacerbated by spiritual/intellectual dissatisfaction regarding instructional relevance, causing Participant D to lose motivation. Deficits in time management occurred via a pragmatic time burden, where compulsory rituals competed with academic demands; Participant E noted religious activities "*slightly increased the academic pressure*." This competition for time is particularly acute for students struggling with English literacy; mandatory religious and institutional time commitments reduce the independent study hours necessary for non-native speakers to complete complex academic writing assignments. Finally, campus faith networks inadvertently created a perceptive inclusion barrier, leaving secular students like Participant G feeling "somewhat excluded."

These findings indicate that negative pathways can be highly pronounced, aligning with Ano and Vasconcelles' (2005) evidence that negative religious struggles predict poorer adjustment. This study extends Xue et al.'s (2024) work by showing that institutional climate impacts are never uniform; they are actively mediated by individual backgrounds, behavioral consistency, and the extent to which students invoke a character-centric neutrality to rely on personal ethics over religious frameworks.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study underscores that the acculturation matrix of international Chinese students in Thailand is an interconnected, multidimensional phenomenon. Quantitatively, English language barriers, writing conventions, and homesickness stand out as primary stressors, compounded by a structural transition from examination-focused traditions to interactive pedagogy. Crucially, this research extends standard acculturation models by identifying the institutional Christian environment as a dual-force structural mechanism. For receptive or Christian students, the campus provides psychological scaffolding through spiritual reframing and a strong sense of institutional belonging. Remarkably, even for secular students, the environment functions as an unintentional sanctuary via a passive buffering effect and peer mutualism, fostering creative acculturation. Conversely, the faith-based environment operates as a double-edged sword; forced rituals, perceived behavioral hypocrisy among staff, and exclusive religious networks introduce a pragmatic time burden, ethical disillusionment, and clear inclusion barriers. Ultimately, the institutional climate's impact is not uniform. It is actively mediated by individual backgrounds, observed behavioral consistency, and the extent to which secular students invoke character-centric neutrality. The empirical and qualitative insights generated by this research carry vital structural, pedagogical, and pastoral weight for faith-based higher education institutions hosting international students. Institutions must recognize that "pedagogical system shock" and classroom reticence stem from discursive adjustments rather than a lack of critical capacity. Consequently, universities should invest in professional development and targeted training for English language teachers and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructors. Training

EAP instructors to implement scaffolded English-Medium Instruction (EMI) transitions, offer explicit ASEAN-context academic integrity training, and address writing anxiety positions English language support as a primary institutional mechanism to alleviate psychological stress and academic exhaustion among international students. Furthermore, to mitigate "spiritual/ritual alienation" and "perceptive inclusion barriers," administrators should decouple mandatory cultural exposure from rigid religious compliance. Providing secular reflective spaces alongside compulsory chapel prevents ethical disillusionment and reduces pragmatic time burdens that compound academic anxiety. Because students are highly sensitive to gaps between theology and behavior, universities must also actively foster genuine, non-judgmental empathy, ensuring that staff and peer interactions reflect professed altruistic values to maximize the environmental "passive buffering effect."

While this investigation clarifies how localized religious environments intersect with transnational academic transitions, several lines of inquiry remain open for subsequent exploration. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track how the interplay between academic stressors and religious strain evolves over a student's multi-year academic lifecycle, determining if active disenchantment deepens or resolves over time. Additionally, comparative studies across diverse institutional profiles—such as secular Thai universities versus Christian or Islamic faith-based universities—would help isolate the precise weight of the religious environment variable against broader host-country societal taboos. By recognizing how institutional environments and language learning friction intersect, English language instructors, EAP practitioners, and program designers in EFL and EMI settings can leverage these insights to implement scaffolded literacy support, cultivate empathetic peer networks, and foster genuinely inclusive classrooms that mitigate psychological stress and support holistic student adaptation.

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