Understanding Stress and Academic Adaptation: A Comparative Study of Chinese International Students in Thailand

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Abstract

Based on grounded theory, this study examines the academic adaptation stress experienced by Chinese international students in Thailand, with a comparative analysis across master's and doctoral students, as well as students from different universities. The study categorizes the sources of academic adaptation stress and draws the following key conclusions: 1) Time management, language adaptation, student-teacher relationships, self-efficacy, and external expectations are the primary stressors for Chinese international students. 2) Master's and doctoral students face distinct types of stress; master's students experience greater stress related to language adaptation, while doctoral students report more stress from role conflicts and external expectations. 3) Differences in language adaptation and external expectations are found between students from Chiang Mai University (CMU) and Khon Kaen University (KKU), with KKU students experiencing relatively higher language adaptation stress. These findings have important practical implications for supporting the academic adaptation of international students.

Keywords: *Stress, Academic Adaptation, Stress Sources, Chinese International Students, Grounded Theory.*

Introduction

The internationalization of global higher education has become a significant driving force in promoting knowledge sharing and cultural exchange (Yang, 2002). Under the framework of the "Belt and Road" initiative, China has strengthened the cultivation of international talents by encouraging students to pursue advanced studies abroad (Liu, 2015; Du & Ma, 2017). As one of the primary study destinations for Chinese students, Thailand has attracted a substantial number of Chinese international students, with approximately 40,000 as of 2017 (Li, 2016). This trend reflects China's key efforts to promote cross-border education and cultural exchange, while also highlighting the complexities of academic adaptation in the context of international education.

For international students, academic adaptation is a crucial component of cultural integration and a key factor for academic success and personal growth. Studies have shown that non-native English-speaking students often face language barriers, which not only limit their deep understanding of academic content but also affect their classroom participation and writing abilities (Ward & Kennedy, 2001; Danisman, 2017). Furthermore, cultural differences, changes in academic norms, and the complexities of student-teacher relationships add to the challenges of adaptation (Selmer & Lauring, 2013; Zhao & Jiang, 2020; Zou, Li & Chen, 2023). Thailand, as a unique cultural and educational environment with distinct teaching styles and evaluation standards, imposes higher demands on Chinese students' adaptation.

In addressing these challenges, understanding the sources of stress faced by Chinese international students in Thailand and their coping strategies becomes particularly important. Weiner's attribution theory (1979) provides a robust theoretical framework for analyzing the academic adaptation stress of international students (Mansoor et al., 2020). To further investigate the specific sources of stress and their impact on academic adaptation, this study focuses on Chinese master's and doctoral students at Chiang Mai University

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(CMU) and Khon Kaen University (KKU). Using grounded theory methodology, the study systematically explores the sources of academic adaptation stress and their influence on the adaptation process. By comparing the adaptation characteristics across different academic stages and institutional environments, this research aims to offer practical recommendations for optimizing support systems for international students.

Literature Review

Academic stress is a significant challenge faced by students in academic environments, with diverse and far-reaching sources. Research indicates that peer competition is one of the major sources of stress, as students often feel tension and anxiety in their pursuit of high grades and academic achievements (Morse & Dravo, 2007). Additionally, unrealistic expectations from teachers and parents increase students' fear of failure, thereby negatively impacting their mental health and academic performance (Tangade, Mathur, Gupta, & Chaudhary, 2011). Exam-related issues, such as insufficient time, high difficulty levels, and prolonged preparation anxiety, also significantly heighten students' stress levels (Hashmat, Hashmat, Amanullah, & Aziz, 2008). Furthermore, an excessive academic workload exacerbates this situation, as many students struggle to balance heavy academic tasks (Stankovska, Dimitrovski, Angelkoska, Ibraimi, & Uka, 2018). These academic stressors not only affect students' mental health but also have a direct negative impact on their academic performance (Sohail, 2013).

For international students, the complexity of academic stress further increases, primarily manifesting as academic adaptation stress. First, language barriers are one of the main sources of adaptation stress. Non-native students often experience frustration and anxiety due to insufficient language proficiency when understanding course content, completing academic tasks, and communicating with teachers or peers (Ward & Kennedy, 2001). Second, cultural differences significantly heighten the difficulty of adaptation. Distinct academic norms and educational philosophies may leave international students feeling disoriented, such as the need to adjust to new teaching styles, assessment standards, and patterns of teacher-student interactions (Lin & Yi, 1997). Additionally, variations in academic systems across countries, including differences in curriculum design, evaluation methods, and academic requirements, further increase the adaptation stress faced by international students (Zimmerman, 1995). Research has shown that international students' ability to cope with new courses and complex academic tasks directly affects their adaptation outcomes (Stankovska et al., 2018). Meanwhile, the lack of social support is another significant source of academic adaptation stress for international students. Feelings of isolation and the absence of an effective social network often leave international students feeling lonely and helpless as they adapt to a new environment, thereby intensifying psychological stress (Trice, 2004). Therefore, both academic stress and academic adaptation stress need to be alleviated through targeted support mechanisms to enhance students' academic performance and mental well-being. Understanding the sources and characteristics of these two types of stress is essential for helping students better cope with academic challenges and achieve holistic development.

In summary, existing research has highlighted the significant impact of language adaptation, cultural conflicts, time management, and lack of social support on the academic adaptation of international students. However, there is a lack of studies addressing the specific adaptation stress faced by Chinese international students in Thai universities, particularly the unique challenges experienced by students at different academic levels, including those related to student-teacher relationships, self-efficacy, and external expectations. Furthermore, the potential differences in adaptation stress between institutional environments, exemplified by Chiang Mai University and Khon Kaen University, have not been thoroughly explored. To address these gaps, this study aims to systematically examine the sources of academic adaptation stress among Chinese international students in Thai universities. Using grounded theory as the analytical approach, the study further investigates the relationship between stress and academic adaptation, while comparing the influences of different academic levels and institutional environments.

Methodology

Target Groups

This study selected Chiang Mai University (CMU) and Khon Kaen University (KKU) as research areas and employed purposeful sampling to explore the academic adaptation of Chinese postgraduate students in Thailand. Chiang Mai University, located in the largest city of northern Thailand, serves as a hub for education, culture, and economic development, fostering a rich environment for cross-cultural exchanges (Srivanit & Hokao, 2012; Setiawan & Rahmi, 2002). Khon Kaen University, situated in northeastern Thailand's economic and educational center, has played a pivotal role in advancing the region's academic and social progress (Marks, 2019). Using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling, the study included 40 Chinese master's and doctoral students, evenly distributed across CMU and KKU. Among them, 28 were female and 12 were male, with equal representation of master's and doctoral students from both universities. This participant diversity provides a robust foundation for analyzing academic adaptation in varied institutional and cultural contexts.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study employs grounded theory, initially proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), as the primary research framework. Grounded theory is particularly suitable for exploring social phenomena in under-researched contexts. Its systematic and iterative nature facilitates the extraction of key concepts and the development of theories through a step-by-step coding process (Pandit, 1996). The coding process, central to grounded theory, consists of three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding involves breaking down interview data into discrete concepts. Axial coding identifies relationships among these concepts to form categories, while selective coding integrates categories into core themes to conceptualize the data holistically (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). By iteratively comparing events and concepts, grounded theory enables the dynamic exploration of stress factors affecting academic adaptation.

Given the diverse backgrounds of Chinese international students in Thailand—including differences in degree programs, academic years, majors, and personal experiences—grounded theory is particularly effective for capturing and conceptualizing their academic adaptation stress. To ensure systematic and rigorous data analysis, qualitative research software Nvivo12 was employed for coding and category development. Nvivo12 facilitated efficient data management, term standardization, and tracking of the iterative coding process.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 40 respondents, evenly distributed across master's and doctoral students at Chiang Mai University and Khon Kaen University. The interviews explored participants' academic adaptation experiences during their postgraduate studies. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was conducted either in person or via video calls, depending on respondents' schedules and travel limitations. To prepare for the analysis, interviewees were informed about the research topics in advance, ensuring they could reflect on their academic challenges.

The transcripts were preprocessed to remove irrelevant information and redundant content, ensuring clarity and consistency in terminology. For example, phrases like "domestic" were replaced with "China," and "Thai classmates" with "Thai students." Preprocessed transcripts formed the foundation for the step-by-step coding process.

Data analysis strictly adhered to the coding principles of grounded theory. During the open coding phase, interview data were broken down into discrete units to identify specific stress factors. Subsequently, in the axial coding phase, relationships among the codes were analyzed to identify broader categories. Finally, through selective coding, these categories were further integrated into core themes, providing a comprehensive understanding of the key factors influencing academic adaptation stress. This iterative process revealed the primary stress factors affecting the academic adaptation of Chinese international students and offered valuable insights for optimizing support systems for international students in Thailand's higher education system.

Results and Discussion

Stress and Academic Adaptation of Chinese International Students Through Grounded Theory

This study applied grounded theory to analyze the stress factors affecting the academic adaptation of Chinese international students in Thailand. Following the coding process of grounded theory—comprising open coding, axial coding, and selective coding—the collected interview data were systematically examined. This approach facilitated the identification of the main factors influencing academic adaptation during postgraduate studies in Thailand.

Open coding served as the foundational step of grounded theory research, where the raw textual data were analyzed line by line and sentence by sentence. Concepts and initial categories were identified through a detailed review and comparison of the data (Chen, 2015). This study reinterpreted the raw data based on the logical relationships between concepts and categories. Through open coding, 790 conceptualized pieces of content were extracted. These concepts were grouped into categories with similar meanings, resulting in 42 categories.

For conciseness, only selected categories, their associated concepts, and representative original statements are presented here as examples. Table 1 showcases open-coded examples to illustrate the process. The 42 identified categories, ranked from the most to least frequent, are as follows: 1. Low communication frequency, 2. Insufficient feedback from supervisors, 3. Lack of depth in academic discussions, 4. Unclear information delivery, 5. Irregular schedules, 6. Insufficient vocabulary, 7. High economic return expectations, 8. High career expectations, 9. Mental fatigue, 10. Frequent syntactic errors, 11. Unclear logical structure, 12. High graduation expectations, 13. Low language fluency, 14. Difficulty understanding classroom content, 15. Improper vocabulary use, 16. Unfamiliarity with accents, 17. Non-transparent exam standards, 18. Lack of reference materials, 19. Poor sleep quality, 20. Accumulation of academic tasks, 21. Unclear exam content scope, 22. Anxiety about speaking, 23. Delayed thesis writing progress, 24. Differences in academic goals, 25. Comparison of graduation times, 26. High expectations for innovation, 27. Conflict between academic and work obligations, 28. Disagreements over research direction, 29. Few published papers, 30. Mixed use of Thai and English vocabulary, 31. Disagreements over research methodology, 32. Lack of high-impact results, 33. Low quality of completed academic tasks, 34. Academic performance competition, 35. Family responsibility conflicts, 36. Unequal allocation of supervisor resources, 37. Unsatisfactory grades, 38. Slow progress of research projects, 39. Supervisors not accepting challenges, 40. High requirements for journal publications, 41. Limited participation in research projects, 42. Graduation delays.

Through this comprehensive analysis, the study identified key stress factors across categories. These factors shed light on the nuanced challenges Chinese international students face during their academic adaptation in Thailand, providing a robust basis for further discussion and implications.

Table 1. Open Coding of Stress and Academic Adaptation of Chinese International Students Through Grounded Theory

Original Text	Conceptualization	Categorization
"Nowadays, I'm constantly worried about how to allocate time between work and study, feeling like I can't handle either."	Difficulty in balancing work and study	Conflict between academic and work obligations
"There are too many trivial matters at home that often distract me."	Overwhelmed by family chores	Conflict with family responsibilities
"I basically stay up late every night writing my thesis."	Staying up late regularly	Irregular sleep schedule
"I toss and turn in bed and just can't fall asleep."	Difficulty falling asleep	Poor sleep quality
"I often find myself staring blankly at the computer for no reason."	Difficulty concentrating	Mental fatigue

"I've changed my research topic several times."	Frequent changes in research topic	Slow progress of research projects
"I can't help procrastinating and always finish everything right before the deadline."	Chronic procrastination	Accumulation of academic tasks
"Sometimes, I get stuck because the logic in my thesis doesn't flow smoothly."	Stuck in writing bottlenecks	Delayed thesis writing progress
"I haven't earned enough credits and have already delayed my graduation by six months."	Insufficient credits	Graduation delay
"When I speak English, I sometimes stutter, and it feels like I can't get the words out."	Lack of fluency in English	Low language fluency
"Many times, I want to express something, but my vocabulary is limited, so I fail to convey the meaning accurately."	Inability to convey meaning accurately	Insufficient vocabulary
"I'm quite afraid of being called on by the teacher to answer questions, fearing I'll say something wrong and be laughed at."	Fear of speaking in class	Anxiety about oral expression
"Some terms in Chinese are translated, so I often get confused."	Misuse of prepositions	Frequent syntactic errors
"Some teachers have a strong Thai accent, and I can't really understand them."	Confusion in writing logic	Unclear logical structure
"During class, there are some topics I don't understand, and it's really difficult to comprehend."	Confusion of terminology	Improper vocabulary usage
"Some Thai terms are hard to explain, and I can't understand the English explanations either."	Thai-accented English	Unfamiliarity with accents
"Sometimes when I communicate with my supervisor, it feels like we're not on the same page."	Difficulty understanding lessons	Difficulty understanding classroom content
"My supervisor just sends a 'good' to me, and that's it."	Difficulty explaining Thai terms	Mixed use of Thai and English vocabulary
"It feels like I've never had a discussion with my supervisor that lasted more than an hour."	Miscommunication between teacher and student	Unclear information delivery
"The feedback cycle from my supervisor is too long, communication frequency is low, and progress is slow."	Superficial feedback from supervisor	Insufficient feedback from supervisor
"My supervisor doesn't like me questioning things and sometimes even suppresses it."	Short discussion time	Lack of depth in academic discussions
"The supervision time my supervisor allocates to students is uneven, and sometimes it feels like the resources are not fairly distributed."	Long feedback cycle	Low communication frequency
"My research field doesn't really align with my supervisor's direction."	Suppression of questioning behavior	Supervisor does not tolerate questioning
"I just want to graduate smoothly, but my supervisor wants me to publish in better journals."	Uneven supervision time	Unequal allocation of supervisor resources
"My supervisor thinks my experimental design is too risky."	Different research fields	Disagreements over research direction
"I have no idea what the QE exam will cover, the scope is very vague, and I don't know how to prepare."	Different expectations for outcomes	Differences in academic goals
"Some terms in Chinese are translated, so I often get	Differences in	Disagreements over

confused."	experimental design	research methodology
"Some teachers have a strong Thai accent, and I can't really understand them."	Unclear exam formats	Unclear exam content scope
"I heard that our exams were graded by a senior student."	Arbitrary grading standards	Non-transparent exam standards
"There are no useful reference materials for the QE exam, so it's really hard to review."	Lack of exam materials	Lack of reference materials
"I haven't published enough papers, and I feel a lot of stress."	Low paper output	Few published papers
"I have no idea how to apply for a research project here in Thailand, and no one understands it."	Lack of understanding about research project opportunities	Limited participation in research projects
"I want to publish in SCI journals, but my level isn't high enough."	No SCI publications	Lack of high-impact results
"I basically just submit my final assignments randomly to get by."	Poor assignment quality	Low quality of completed academic tasks
"I got a B in a few courses, so I can't achieve a 4.0 GPA."	Low GPA	Unsatisfactory grades
"Some people in my class have already graduated early, and I feel a bit anxious."	Differences in graduation progress	Comparison of graduation times
"When you see others publishing in SCI, you also want to publish."	Competition in research achievements	Competition in academic achievements
"My family hopes that I can graduate early and start working sooner, so I feel a lot of stress."	Desire to graduate early	High graduation expectations
"My family has always hoped that I would become a university teacher, otherwise I wouldn't have planned to continue studying."	Becoming a university teacher	High career expectations
"My family hopes that after graduation, I can find a better job with a higher salary."	High salary expectations	High economic return expectations
"My supervisor wants me to submit articles to high-impact journals, the higher the impact factor, the better."	High-impact journals	High journal publication requirements
"My supervisor always thinks my thesis lacks innovation."	Research innovation	High expectations for innovation

In the axial coding phase, the 42 initial categories were refined, classified, and

assigned new attributes, resulting in 15 main categories: 1. Role conflict, 2. Insufficient rest, 3. Slow academic progress, 4. Poor oral expression, 5. Inadequate writing skills, 6. Difficulty in listening comprehension, 7. Poor academic communication, 8. Power imbalance, 9. Academic disagreements, 10. Lack of exam information, 11. Few academic achievements, 12. Poor academic performance, 13. Strong peer competition, 14. High family expectations, and 15. High supervisor demands.

Subsequently, through continuous comparison and synthesis of the original data,

five core categories of stress impacting the academic adaptation process of international students were identified: 1. Time management stress, 2. Language adaptation stress, 3. Student-teacher relationship stress, 4. Self-efficacy stress, and 5. External expectations stress (see Table 2).

Table 2. The Three-Level Coding Process of Academic Adaptation Stress

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
Academic and work conflict (15), Family responsibility conflict (11)	Role conflict (3.29%)	Time management stress (18.61%)
Irregular sleep schedule (28), Poor sleep quality (20), Mental fatigue (24)	Insufficient rest (9.12%)	
Slow progress of research projects (10), Accumulation of academic tasks (20), Delayed thesis writing progress (17), Graduation delay (2)	Slow academic progress (6.20%)	
Low language fluency (23), Insufficient vocabulary (28), Anxiety about oral expression (19)	Poor oral expression (8.86%)	Language adaptation stress (25.19%)
Frequent syntactic errors (24), Unclear logical structure (24), Improper vocabulary usage (22)	Inadequate writing skills (8.86%)	
Unfamiliarity with accents (22), Difficulty understanding classroom content (23), Mixed use of Thai and English vocabulary (14)	Difficulty in listening comprehension (7.47%)	
Unclear information delivery (30), Insufficient feedback from supervisor (32), Lack of depth in academic discussions (31), Low communication frequency (34)	Poor academic communication (16.07%)	Student-teacher relationship stress (24.30%)
Supervisor does not tolerate questioning (10), Unequal allocation of supervisor resources (11)	Power imbalance (2.66%)	
Disagreements over research direction (15), Differences in academic goals (16), Disagreements over research methodology (13)	Academic disagreements (5.57%)	
Unclear exam content scope (20), Non-transparent exam standards (21), Lack of reference materials (21)	Lack of exam information (7.86%)	Self-efficacy stress (18.61%)
Few published papers (15), Limited participation in research projects (7), Lack of high-impact results (12)	Few academic achievements (4.30%)	
Low quality of completed academic tasks (12), Unsatisfactory grades (11)	Poor academic performance (2.91%)	
Comparison of graduation times (16), Competition in academic achievements (12)	Strong peer competition (3.54%)	
High graduation expectations (24), High career expectations (27), High economic return expectations (28)	High family expectations (10.00%)	External expectations stress (13.29%)
High journal publication requirements (10), High expectations for innovation (16)	High supervisor demands (3.29%)	

The data reveals that time management stress accounts for 18.61% of the overall academic stress, stemming primarily from role conflict, insufficient rest, and slow academic progress. Role conflict (3.29%) arises from the tension between academic, work, and family responsibilities, making it difficult for international students to allocate time effectively, which adversely affects their academic adaptation. Insufficient rest (9.12%) is

the largest contributor to time management stress, accounting for nearly one-tenth of the total stress. This includes irregular schedules and sleep deprivation caused by heavy academic workloads, which lead to mental fatigue and reduced learning efficiency. Slow academic progress (6.20%) manifests in delays in research projects, thesis writing, and accumulated tasks. These bottlenecks heighten anxiety and psychological stress among students.

Language adaptation stress, comprising 25.19% of the total stress, is the most significant source of stress for international students, emphasizing the pivotal role of language challenges in academic adaptation. Poor oral expression (8.86%) is a common source of stress in classes or academic exchanges. Limited vocabulary and fluency make students anxious and hinder their active participation in discussions, reducing their contribution to academic content. Inadequate writing skills (8.86%) also contribute significantly to stress, as students often encounter issues such as syntactic errors, disorganized logic, and improper vocabulary in academic writing, which directly impacts their academic performance. Additionally, difficulty in listening comprehension (7.47%) creates challenges, particularly when students encounter heavy accents or mixed Thai-English vocabulary, making it hard to understand classroom content or supervisor guidance, thereby slowing academic progress.

Student-teacher relationship stress accounts for 24.30% of the total stress, representing a crucial aspect of academic adaptation. Poor academic communication (16.07%) is the primary contributor, with students frequently experiencing low communication frequency, delayed feedback, or insufficient depth in discussions with their supervisors. For example, long feedback cycles and limited discussion time hinder students' academic progress. Power imbalance (2.66%) reflects the inequality some students perceive in the student-teacher relationship, where expressing academic opinions may lead to suppression or limited opportunities for open discussion, adding to their psychological burden. Academic disagreements (5.57%) also contribute to stress, particularly when differences arise regarding research direction, academic goals, or methodology, complicating decision-making and delaying research progress or publication.

Self-efficacy stress, comprising 18.61% of the total academic stress, reflects the doubts students have about their abilities during academic adaptation. Insufficient exam information (7.86%) is the main source of this stress, as unclear exam scopes, non-transparent standards, and a lack of reference materials leave students confused and underprepared, undermining their confidence in their academic capabilities. Low academic output (4.30%) adds to the stress, particularly when students struggle with publishing papers or achieving high-impact results, which makes academic breakthroughs more challenging and diminishes their sense of self-efficacy. Poor academic performance (2.91%)—manifesting in low-quality task completion or unsatisfactory grades—further contributes to stress, though to a lesser extent.

External expectation stress accounts for 13.29% of the total academic stress. While its proportion is smaller, it underscores the influence of external factors on students' academic adaptation. High family expectations (10.00%) are the primary source of this stress, as students face significant psychological stress from their families' high aspirations regarding academic achievements, early graduation, or securing well-paid jobs. These expectations often impact their academic performance and self-identity. Additionally, high supervisor demands (3.29%)—such as stringent requirements for research output, paper publications, or academic innovation—exacerbate the dual stress of academic progress and creativity, intensifying the students' psychological burden.

Comparison of Stress and Academic Adaptation of the Master's Degree and Doctoral Degree Groups

To investigate the differences in academic adaptation stress between master's and doctoral students, this study analyzed the data for each group separately, with the categorized results presented in the table. The findings indicate notable differences in how the two groups experience and adapt to the academic stress. A deeper analysis provides valuable insights into the specific adaptation needs and challenges faced at different academic stages.

Table 3. Comparison of Stress Sources Between Master's and Doctoral Students

Master's Group	Doctoral Group	Master's Group	Doctoral Group
Role conflict (0.83%)	Role conflict (5.39%)	Time management stress (19.01%)	Time management stress (18.27%)
Insufficient rest (10.47%)	Insufficient rest (7.96%)		
Slow academic progress (7.71%)	Slow academic progress (4.92%)		
Poor oral expression (9.92%)	Poor oral expression (7.96%)	Language adaptation stress (28.37%)	Language adaptation stress (22.48%)
Inadequate writing skills (9.92%)	Inadequate writing skills (7.96%)		
Difficulty in listening comprehension (8.54%)	Difficulty in listening comprehension (6.56%)		
Poor academic communication (17.08%)	Poor academic communication (15.22%)	Student-teacher relationship stress (25.62%)	Student-teacher relationship stress (23.19%)
Power imbalance (3.03%)	Power imbalance (2.34%)		
Academic disagreements (5.51%)	Academic disagreements (5.62%)		
Lack of exam information (8.54%)	Lack of exam information (7.26%)	Self-efficacy stress (16.53%)	Self-efficacy stress (20.37%)
Few academic achievements (1.65%)	Few academic achievements (6.56%)		
Poor academic performance (3.03%)	Poor academic performance (2.81%)		
Strong peer competition (3.31%)	Strong peer competition (3.75%)		
High family expectations (8.82%)	High family expectations (11.01%)	External expectations stress (10.47%)	External expectations stress (15.69%)
High supervisor demands (1.65%)	High supervisor demands (4.68%)		

Time Management Stress

Master's students experience slightly higher overall time management stress

compared to doctoral students, with 19.01% of master's students reporting this stress versus 18.27% of doctoral students. Insufficient rest is particularly prominent among master's students, accounting for 10.47%, compared to 7.96% for doctoral students. This difference is partly attributed to the lifestyle habits of master's students, many of whom are accustomed to staying up late, leading to poor sleep and reduced productivity. In contrast, doctoral students generally prioritize health management and maintain more regular routines. Slow academic progress also contributes significantly to time management stress for master's students (7.71%), while it is less of a concern for doctoral students (4.92%). Master's students often need to adapt to a new academic environment and acquire research skills, which can delay progress on tasks like thesis writing. Doctoral students, on the other hand, benefit from a stronger academic foundation and focus on specific research areas, resulting in smoother progress and less stress.

Conversely, doctoral students report significantly higher stress from role conflict compared to master's students. While only 0.83% of master's students face this issue, it affects 5.39% of doctoral students. This disparity reflects the additional responsibilities that doctoral students must juggle, such as teaching, research, and family obligations, which make it challenging to balance their academic and personal lives. In contrast, most master's students are full-time students with fewer external responsibilities, resulting in lower stress from role conflict.

Language Adaptation Stress

Language adaptation stress is significantly higher for master's students (28.37%)

than for doctoral students (22.48%). Master's students face more language challenges during the early stages of their academic journey abroad, particularly in areas like oral expression, academic writing, and listening comprehension. In contrast, doctoral students often have a higher level of language proficiency and rely on tools like translation software or peer support to manage language-related issues more effectively. This ability allows doctoral students to focus on conveying their ideas rather than perfecting language nuances, reducing their overall stress in this area.

Student-Teacher Relationship Stress

Master's students also experience slightly higher stress in student-teacher

relationships compared to doctoral students, with 25.62% of master's students reporting this stress versus 23.19% of doctoral students. This difference is mainly due to master's students' greater reliance on their supervisors for guidance and feedback. When supervision or feedback is insufficient, it significantly increases their academic stress. In contrast, doctoral students tend to operate more independently in their research. While they still require support from their supervisors, their autonomy reduces their stress in this area.

Self-Efficacy Stress

Doctoral students experience significantly higher self-efficacy stress compared to

master's students, with 20.37% of doctoral students reporting this stress versus 16.53% of master's students. This difference stems from the advanced research tasks and high expectations for academic achievements faced by doctoral students. Doctoral students are often required to produce innovative research, publish in high-impact journals, and achieve notable academic outputs, which can lead to doubts about their capabilities. Specifically, 6.56% of doctoral students report stress from low academic output, compared to only 1.65% of master's students. Master's students, by contrast, typically engage in more foundational academic tasks, resulting in lower self-efficacy stress.

External Expectation Stress

External expectation stress is also notably higher among doctoral students, with

15.69% experiencing this stress compared to 10.47% of master's students. This reflects the higher expectations placed on doctoral students by family, supervisors, and society, particularly regarding career achievements and academic contributions. Family expectations are a significant source of stress, affecting 11.01% of doctoral students versus 8.82% of master's students. Master's students, by contrast, face relatively lenient external demands, with less stress related to academic performance and career outcomes, leading to lower psychological stress.

Comparison of Stress and Academic Adaptation of Chinese International Students of Khon Kaen University and Chiang Mai University

This study examined the differences in academic adaptation stress faced by Chinese international students at two prominent universities in Thailand: Chiang Mai University (CMU) and Khon Kaen University (KKU). Data specific to Chinese students from both institutions were extracted from the overall sample and categorized, with the results summarized in the accompanying table. The findings reveal significant variations in how students from the two universities experience and cope with academic stress. Further analysis aims to provide deeper insights into the specific adaptation needs and challenges faced by these groups at different academic stages.

Table 4. Comparison of Stress Sources of Chinese International Students Khon Kaen University and Chiang Mai University

CMU Group	KKU Group	CMU Group	KKU Group
Role conflict (3.50%)	Role conflict (3.10%)	Time management stress (18.87%)	Time management stress (18.38%)
Insufficient rest (9.16%)	Insufficient rest (9.07%)		
Slow academic progress (6.20%)	Slow academic progress (6.21%)		
Poor oral expression (8.09%)	Poor oral expression (9.55%)	Language adaptation stress (24.26%)	Language adaptation stress (26.01%)
Inadequate writing skills (8.63%)	Inadequate writing skills (9.07%)		
Difficulty in listening comprehension (7.55%)	Difficulty in listening comprehension (7.40%)		
Poor academic communication (16.17%)	Poor academic communication (15.99%)	Student-teacher relationship stress (24.26%)	Student-teacher relationship stress (24.34%)
Power imbalance (2.43%)	Power imbalance (2.86%)		
Academic disagreements (5.66%)	Academic disagreements (5.49%)		
Lack of exam information (7.55%)	Lack of exam information (8.11%)	Self-efficacy stress (18.60%)	Self-efficacy stress (18.62%)
Few academic achievements (4.58%)	Few academic achievements (4.06%)		
Poor academic performance (2.70%)	Poor academic performance (3.10%)		
Strong peer competition (3.77%)	Strong peer competition (3.34%)		
High family expectations (10.51%)	High family expectations (9.55%)	External expectations stress (14.02%)	External expectations stress (12.65%)
High supervisor demands (3.50%)	High supervisor demands (3.10%)		

From the data in the table, it is evident that there are three key stress points

with minimal differences between Chinese students at CMU and KKU regarding academic adaptation: time management, student-teacher relationships, and self-efficacy.

Firstly, in terms of time management stress, CMU students report 18.87%,

while KKU students report 18.38%, indicating that students at both universities face similar challenges in managing course schedules, academic tasks, and time allocation. Time management is a common struggle for both groups.

Secondly, for student-teacher relationship stress, CMU is at 24.26% and KKU

at 24.34%, showing almost no difference between the two groups. This suggests that students at both universities face comparable challenges in communication and guidance with their professors, making student-teacher relationships a significant source of stress.

Lastly, self-efficacy stress is also very close, with CMU at 18.60% and KKU at

18.62%. This indicates that students at both universities generally feel a lack of confidence in their academic abilities, contributing to self-efficacy stress. These similarities highlight common challenges faced by students at both institutions in adapting academically.

In addition to the similarities in time management, student-teacher relationships,

and self-efficacy stress, there are some differences in language adaptation and external expectation stress between Chinese students at the two universities. KKU students experience slightly higher language adaptation stress (26.01%) compared to CMU students (24.26%). Specifically, KKU students report greater difficulty with oral expression (9.55%) and writing skills (9.07%), while the difference in listening comprehension difficulties is minimal (a 0.15% difference). Overall, language adaptation remains a significant source of stress for international students at both universities.

On the other hand, CMU students experience slightly higher external expectation

stress (14.02%) compared to KKU students (12.65%), with CMU students particularly feeling more stress from family expectations (10.51%). This suggests that CMU students bear a heavier psychological burden regarding academic and career achievements, especially from family expectations. This could be due to CMU's higher recognition in China compared to KKU, leading to greater stress on CMU students to meet heightened family expectations.

Conclusion

This study, employing grounded theory, analyzed the academic adaptation stresses faced by Chinese international students in Thailand and conducted a detailed comparative analysis of master's, doctoral, and students from different universities. By categorizing and examining these stresses, the following key conclusions were drawn:

The study identified five main academic adaptation stresses faced by Chinese

international students: time management stress, language adaptation stress, student-teacher relationship stress, self-efficacy stress, and external expectation stress. These sources of stress share certain commonalities across different academic stages and universities. Language adaptation stress emerged as the most prominent issue, accounting for 25.19%, underscoring the centrality of language challenges in academic adaptation.

ignificant differences in academic adaptation stresses were observed between

master's and doctoral students. Master's students experience higher language adaptation stress (28.37%) and insufficient rest stress (10.47%) compared to doctoral students. On the other hand, doctoral students face greater stress from role conflict (5.39%) and external expectations (15.69%). This indicates that while doctoral students need to better balance academics, family, and work, master's students encounter more challenges related to language barriers and time management.

Differences in academic adaptation stresses were also found between Chinese

international students at Chiang Mai University (CMU) and Khon Kaen University (KKU). KKU students experience higher language adaptation stress (26.01%) compared to CMU students (24.26%), whereas CMU students face slightly higher external expectation stress (14.02%) than KKU students (12.65%). These differences may stem from the academic environments and family backgrounds of students at the two universities. However, time management, student-teacher relationships, and self-efficacy stresses exhibit significant similarities among students from both universities.

Based on the research findings and relevant literature, this study reveals the academic

adaptation stress faced by Chinese international students in higher education in Thailand and offers five key research implications:

First, there is a marked conflict between time management stress and the ingrained learning styles of Chinese international students. Chinese students often show great respect for teacher authority and emphasize extensive note-taking (Volet & Renshaw, 1996). However, this passive learning style is misaligned with the autonomous learning and time management required in Thai higher education. Time management stress is particularly pronounced among master's students (18.61%), who struggle to balance academic tasks and personal life. Thai universities should implement time management training and self-directed learning guidance to help international students transition from passive to active time planning, thereby improving their academic efficiency.

Second, language adaptation stress significantly affects students' academic performance and classroom participation. Chinese international students, who often lack the habit of asking questions and participating in discussions (Chapman & Chien, 2015), struggle to integrate into Thai classrooms due to language limitations and face significant stress in academic writing. To address this, Thai universities should strengthen language support by offering training in academic writing and discussion skills. This would enable international students to engage more confidently in cross-cultural classrooms and enhance their academic adaptation.

Third, student-teacher relationship stress is a critical issue in the adaptation process for Chinese international students. A strong student-teacher relationship improves both academic performance and overall learning satisfaction (Wang & Ma, 2023). The study found that student-teacher relationship stress is similar for students at CMU and KKU (around 24%), primarily arising from inadequate supervision and poor communication with supervisors. Thai universities should improve supervisor training to enhance their understanding of the academic needs and cultural backgrounds of Chinese students, fostering better academic support through frequent and meaningful interactions.

Moreover, self-efficacy stress is a major source of stress for Chinese international students, particularly for doctoral students (20.37%). Traditional learning models often lead Chinese students to rely heavily on teacher instructions and feedback, which poses challenges to their self-efficacy when they are required to conduct independent academic work (Zhou, Zhang & Liu, 2023). Thai universities should provide additional academic resources and psychological support to help doctoral students build confidence and improve self-efficacy when tackling complex academic tasks.

Lastly, external expectation stress is especially significant among doctoral students (15.69%), driven by the high expectations of family and supervisors regarding academic achievements and career prospects. Excessive external expectations often increase psychological stress and hinder academic adaptation. Thai universities should establish comprehensive psychological support systems to help students manage external expectations effectively. Providing career planning and development advice could also reduce the stress from family and supervisor expectations, enabling students to achieve a healthier balance between academic and career goals.

Recommendation for Further Research

This study focused exclusively on master's and doctoral students from Chiang Mai University and Khon Kaen University, thereby excluding students from other regions of Thailand, such as central and southern areas, as well as undergraduate students. This limitation results in a relatively narrow dataset, reducing the diversity and generalizability of the findings. Future research should expand its scope to include students from a broader range of regions and academic levels, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of academic adaptation across different contexts.

Additionally, this study relied on a limited set of data sources, which constrains the depth and diversity of insights. Future studies should prioritize the use of multiple channels and varied data sources to enhance the scientific rigor and persuasiveness of their findings.

While this research identified five types of academic adaptation stress faced by Chinese international students using grounded theory, it does not claim to have captured all possible sources of stress. Further exploration is needed to uncover additional stressors and their impacts, providing a more holistic understanding of the academic adaptation challenges faced by international students.

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