

Intercultural Dilemmas and Coping Strategies in Chinese Language Teaching at Thai Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT

With the deepening of China–Thailand educational cooperation, Chinese has become one of the most widely taught foreign languages in Thai primary schools, and teachers from China, including government-sponsored teachers and international Chinese language education volunteers, constitute a major part of the teaching workforce. Adopting a qualitative approach based on documentary analysis and theoretical interpretation, this article examines the intercultural dilemmas that Chinese teachers encounter in Thai primary school classrooms. Drawing on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory, research on Thai cultural values, and Byram’s model of intercultural communicative competence, the analysis identifies four interrelated dilemmas: a conflict between Chinese expressions of teacher authority and the Thai emphasis on enjoyable learning; a mismatch in pedagogical beliefs and assessment practices; a one-directional and insufficiently localized approach to cultural content; and structural constraints arising from high teacher turnover and the lack of a shared classroom language. In response, the article proposes coping strategies at four levels: developing teachers’ intercultural competence, localizing classroom management, making cultural teaching dialogic, and strengthening institutional support. The study aims to offer a reference for improving the quality of Chinese language teaching in Thai primary schools.

KEYWORDS intercultural teaching; Thai primary schools; international Chinese language education; Chinese teachers; teaching dilemmas

1. Introduction

Thailand is among the countries in Southeast Asia where Chinese language education has expanded most rapidly. Since the early 2000s, cooperation between China and Thailand in this field has steadily intensified, and large numbers of Chinese teachers and volunteers have been dispatched to Thai schools every year, a considerable proportion of whom work at the primary and secondary levels. Wu and Yang (2008) characterized the rapid spread of Chinese in Thailand as a distinctive “Thai model” of language dissemination, while also noting persistent difficulties in areas such as teacher supply and

teaching materials. Similarly, Wang (2008), in a survey of Chinese education in Thai primary and secondary schools, identified the instability of the teaching workforce and the limited suitability of teaching approaches as key factors constraining teaching quality.

Compared with secondary and tertiary settings, Chinese teaching in primary schools has several distinctive features. Learners are young, their attention spans are short, their motivation is driven largely by interest, and teachers and pupils often lack a common language. In this context, cultural difference is not merely a matter of the teacher's personal adjustment to life abroad; it directly shapes classroom organization, teacher-student interaction, and learning outcomes. Existing research, however, has tended to focus on Chinese teachers' sociocultural adaptation and culture shock, while comparatively little attention has been paid to how intercultural dilemmas arise within classroom teaching itself.

Understanding these dilemmas matters for several reasons. For teachers, a clearer picture of the cultural sources of classroom difficulties can reduce frustration and support more effective teaching. For sending institutions, it can inform the design of pre-service training and in-service support. For Thai schools, it can help create conditions in which Chinese teachers are able to contribute more fully. More broadly, the case of Thailand, where Chinese teaching has expanded on an unusually large scale at the primary level, offers insights relevant to international Chinese language education in other contexts where teachers and learners come from markedly different educational cultures.

This article therefore addresses two questions. First, what intercultural dilemmas do Chinese teachers face in teaching Chinese at Thai primary schools, and what are their cultural roots? Second, how can these dilemmas be addressed at the individual, classroom, and institutional levels? The study adopts a qualitative approach. Drawing on existing empirical studies, educational policy texts, and intercultural theory as its analytical materials, it uses induction, comparison, and interpretation to develop a theoretically grounded account of the problems and possible responses.

2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws on three bodies of theory. The first is Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (Hofstede et al., 2010). Both China and Thailand score relatively high on power distance and collectivism. Yet the same dimension may be expressed very differently in the two countries' classrooms. This apparent similarity is precisely what leads many Chinese teachers to assume that Thai classrooms will resemble their own, and thus to overlook important differences.

The second is research on Thai cultural values. Komin (1990) identified a set of core Thai value orientations, including ego and face, smooth interpersonal relationships, flexibility and adjustment, and a fun-pleasure orientation. Mulder (2000) likewise emphasized that hierarchy and Buddhist ethics deeply inform everyday social interaction in Thailand. Hallinger and Kantamara (2000) further showed that change processes in Thai schools are strongly mediated by cultural norms of hierarchy and interpersonal harmony, so that reforms imported from other contexts are reshaped as they are implemented.

The third is Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, which comprises knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Complementing this model, Kramsch's (1993) notion of a "third place" in language

education provides a theoretical basis for moving cultural teaching away from one-way transmission and toward dialogue between the learner's own culture and the target culture.

3. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design based on documentary analysis. Rather than collecting new field data, it synthesizes and reinterprets existing materials in order to construct an analytical account of intercultural dilemmas in Thai primary Chinese classrooms. Three categories of material were examined: published empirical studies on Chinese language teaching in Thailand and on the adaptation of Chinese teachers and volunteers; research on Thai educational reform and Thai cultural values; and foundational works in intercultural communication and language education.

The analysis proceeded in three steps. First, recurring problems reported in the literature on Chinese teaching in Thailand were identified and grouped into thematic categories, such as classroom discipline, teaching methods, cultural content, and working conditions. Second, each category was interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework outlined above, with attention to the cultural values and educational assumptions underlying the observed difficulties. Third, the analysis moved from diagnosis to response, deriving coping strategies that correspond to each dilemma and to the levels at which it operates.

This design has clear limitations. Because it relies on secondary materials, it cannot capture the full diversity of individual teachers' experiences or variation across regions and types of schools. Its contribution lies instead in offering an integrated conceptual framework that connects scattered observations to their cultural roots and that can guide subsequent empirical research.

4. Intercultural Dilemmas in Thai Primary School Chinese Classrooms

4.1 Classroom Management: Shared Respect for Teachers, Different Expressions of Authority

Thai society holds teachers in high regard, as reflected in the annual wai khru ceremony in which students pay formal respect to their teachers. However, respect for teachers in Thailand does not translate into the quiet listening and strict discipline that many Chinese teachers expect. Thai primary classrooms are widely guided by the principle of *sanuk* (fun); pupils are lively and active, and the classroom atmosphere tends to be relaxed. Many Chinese teachers judge Thai classrooms by Chinese standards of discipline, conclude that students are "undisciplined" and "hard to manage," and respond by raising their voices or criticizing students publicly.

In Thai culture, however, the open display of anger is often regarded as a lack of self-control, and public criticism may cause a student to lose face and disrupt the smooth relationship between teacher and student (Komin, 1990). As a result, students may withdraw from the teacher and participate less, while the teacher finds that stricter control only produces more disorder. The root of the problem, therefore, is not a lack of respect on the part of Thai students, but differing cultural assumptions about how authority should be expressed and exercised in the classroom.

This dilemma is particularly instructive because it arises from an apparent cultural similarity. Both societies are characterized by relatively high power distance (Hofstede et al., 2010), and Chinese teachers may therefore expect Thai pupils to accept teacher authority in the same way as Chinese

pupils. In the Chinese classroom, however, authority is often expressed through explicit rules, direct correction, and visible control, whereas in the Thai classroom it tends to be expressed through warmth, emotional composure, and the maintenance of harmonious relationships. Authority in Thai schools is real, but it is relational rather than coercive. A teacher who appears calm, kind, and patient is more likely to be respected than one who appears strict.

4.2 Mismatched Pedagogical Beliefs and Assessment Practices

Most Chinese teachers were educated in a system that emphasizes foundational training and examination-based assessment. Accordingly, they tend to center their teaching on character writing, vocabulary memorization, and repeated drilling, and to evaluate learning through tests. In Thai primary schools, by contrast, Chinese classes are often allotted limited time, schools place greater value on pupils' interest and on performances and activities, assessment is comparatively lenient, and pupils generally experience little examination pressure.

Thailand's National Education Act of 1999 established learner-centered teaching as a central reform goal. Research has shown, however, that the reform was implemented largely from the top down and that its effects on everyday teaching and learning were limited, partly because of a cultural tendency to treat change as an event rather than a long-term process (Hallinger & Lee, 2011). Chinese teachers thus face a double gap. On the one hand, their drill-oriented methods do not match schools' expectations of enjoyable learning. On the other hand, schools' expectations regarding learning outcomes remain vague, leaving teachers without clear feedback or recognition of their work.

This mismatch also affects teachers' professional identity. Teachers who measure success by test results may feel that their efforts are wasted when pupils forget characters from one week to the next, while schools may view the same teachers as overly serious or demanding. Without a shared understanding of what counts as successful learning in a primary Chinese class, both sides may form negative judgments of each other. The issue, then, is not simply which method is better, but whether teachers and schools can negotiate a common set of expectations that balances enjoyment with meaningful progress.

4.3 One-Directional and Insufficiently Localized Cultural Content

In primary Chinese classrooms, cultural teaching typically centers on topics such as the Spring Festival, paper-cutting, Peking opera, and the Great Wall, presented mainly through teacher demonstration and student observation. Although this China-centered, one-way transmission is vivid and accessible, it seldom connects with pupils' own life experiences. Cultural teaching therefore risks becoming superficial and symbolic, producing familiarity with cultural icons rather than genuine intercultural understanding.

From Byram's (1997) perspective, the core of intercultural competence lies in relating and comparing one's own culture with the target culture. Thailand in fact possesses a rich Chinese–Thai cultural heritage, and many festival customs and food traditions share historical roots with those of China. Yet these local resources remain underused in teaching. In addition, some teaching materials depict situations that are distant from the everyday lives of Thai primary pupils, which further reinforces the sense that the cultural content does not “fit” the local context.

A further problem is that one-directional cultural presentation may unintentionally position Chinese culture as something to be admired rather than understood. Pupils are invited to watch and imitate, but seldom to ask questions, express their own views, or compare what they see with their own experiences. Such an approach may develop cultural knowledge in a narrow sense, but it does little to foster the attitudes of curiosity and openness, or the skills of interpreting and relating, that Byram (1997) places at the center of intercultural competence.

4.4 Structural Constraints: Teacher Turnover and the Absence of a Shared Language

Volunteer teachers usually serve relatively short terms in Thailand, which leads to frequent staff turnover. Teaching experience is therefore difficult to accumulate and transmit at the school level, and schools and pupils must repeatedly adjust to new teachers. Moreover, many Chinese teachers have limited Thai proficiency, while pupils' English and Chinese are not sufficient to understand complex classroom instructions. Without an effective medium of communication, classroom organization becomes inefficient, and teachers struggle to convey their intentions and emotions accurately.

Intercultural friction also extends beyond the classroom. In interactions with Thai colleagues and administrators, the cultural norm of *kreng jai*, a concern for not imposing on or upsetting others, often leads Thai interlocutors to avoid direct refusal or criticism, and Chinese teachers may misread polite indirectness as agreement. Furthermore, frequent sports days, religious festivals, and school events often disrupt teaching schedules. This reflects the Thai orientation toward flexibility and adjustment (Komin, 1990), whereas Chinese teachers accustomed to planning and predictability may experience anxiety and frustration.

Taken together, these structural factors mean that many intercultural difficulties are not resolved within a single teaching term. Each new cohort of teachers encounters similar problems, often without access to the experience of its predecessors, so that the same misunderstandings are repeated year after year. This suggests that the dilemmas described above should not be attributed solely to individual teachers' shortcomings; they are reproduced by the way teaching is organized.

Table 1 summarizes the four dilemmas, their main manifestations, and their underlying cultural or structural sources.

Table 1. Intercultural dilemmas in Thai primary school Chinese teaching

Dilemma	Main manifestations	Underlying sources
Classroom management	Perceived indiscipline; teacher raises voice or criticizes publicly; pupil withdrawal	Different expressions of authority; face; <i>sanuk</i> orientation
Pedagogy and assessment	Drill-oriented teaching versus activity-based expectations; vague learning goals	Examination-oriented versus learner-centered educational traditions
Cultural content	Symbolic, one-way presentation of Chinese culture; weak links to pupils' lives	China-centered materials; underuse of local Chinese–Thai heritage
Structural constraints	Frequent turnover; lack of a shared language; disrupted schedules; misread indirectness	Short terms of service; limited Thai proficiency; <i>kreng jai</i> ; flexibility orientation

5. Coping Strategies

5.1 Developing Teachers' Intercultural Competence

Pre-service training should go beyond general introductions to Thai culture by incorporating authentic cases from Thai primary classrooms. It should focus on the attitudinal dimension and on the skills of interpreting and relating, so that teachers learn to recognize and reflect on their own cultural assumptions. Training in basic Thai classroom language should also be strengthened. During the teaching term, reflective journals, peer exchange, and experience-sharing sessions can help teachers continuously develop their intercultural sensitivity.

Importantly, the goal of such training is not to replace Chinese teaching values with Thai ones, but to help teachers develop the flexibility to move between different cultural frames. A teacher who understands why Thai pupils respond poorly to public criticism, for instance, does not need to abandon high expectations; rather, the teacher can learn to pursue those expectations through culturally appropriate means.

5.2 Localizing Classroom Management

Teachers should build on the learning characteristics of Thai primary pupils by replacing public criticism with positive reinforcement and by turning *sanuk* into a source of learning motivation through games, songs, Total Physical Response activities, and team competitions. Classroom rules should be simple, visual, and consistently reinforced. Problem behavior is better addressed through private conversation, and teachers should actively involve Thai homeroom teachers or teaching assistants, thereby establishing their authority in ways that are culturally appropriate.

Localizing classroom management also involves rethinking the balance between enjoyment and learning. Fun activities should not be treated as a reward that follows serious study, but as a vehicle through which language is practiced. Well-designed games can include repeated listening and speaking practice, allowing pupils to consolidate language while experiencing the class as *sanuk*.

5.3 Making Cultural Teaching Dialogic

Cultural teaching should shift from “presenting China” to fostering a dialogue between Chinese and Thai cultures. For example, teachers can compare the Spring Festival with Songkran, or the Mid-Autumn Festival with Loy Krathong, guiding pupils to discover similarities and differences between the two traditions. Teachers can also draw on the cultural resources of local Thai Chinese communities, allowing pupils to understand Chinese culture through familiar contexts and creating in the classroom what Kramsch (1993) described as a “third place.”

Such dialogic cultural teaching need not be complex. Even simple tasks, such as asking pupils to compare how their families celebrate a festival with how a Chinese family might celebrate a similar occasion, can encourage pupils to observe, compare, and reflect. In this way, cultural teaching supports both language learning and the development of intercultural attitudes.

5.4 Strengthening Institutional Coordination and Support

Sending institutions and host schools should establish standardized handover procedures and shared archives of teaching resources to reduce the discontinuity caused by teacher turnover. Where possible,

terms of service could be extended, or co-teaching between Chinese teachers and local Thai teachers of Chinese could be promoted. At the school level, clearer curriculum goals and assessment standards for Chinese would give teachers a clearer sense of direction and the support they need.

Finally, institutional support should also address communication between Chinese teachers and Thai colleagues. Regular, low-pressure channels for feedback, such as informal meetings with a designated mentor teacher, can help overcome the indirectness associated with *kreng jai* and allow problems to be identified before they escalate.

6. Conclusion

The dilemmas of Chinese language teaching in Thai primary schools are, in essence, the product of an encounter between two educational cultures within the classroom. The problems Chinese teachers face stem not only from gaps in individual intercultural competence but also from differences in classroom culture, divergent pedagogical beliefs, and institutional arrangements. Effective responses should therefore not be limited to teachers' personal adjustment; they require coordinated action at the individual, classroom, and institutional levels, enabling a shift from mere cultural adaptation to genuinely intercultural teaching. As this study relies primarily on documentary analysis and theoretical interpretation, future research could employ in-depth interviews and classroom observation to examine these dilemmas and test the effectiveness of the proposed strategies empirically.

The study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, it shifts attention from teachers' personal adaptation to the classroom as the primary site where intercultural dilemmas emerge. Second, it shows that apparent cultural similarities between China and Thailand, such as respect for teachers and high power distance, can conceal significant differences in how these values are enacted in schools, and that such hidden differences may be a major source of misunderstanding.

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