

THAI CULTURAL ASSIMILATION THROUGH EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES: A CASE STUDY OF EXCHANGE STUDENTS AT THE INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, RAMKHAMHAENG UNIVERSITY

การปรับตัวสู่วัฒนธรรมไทยผ่านการทำกิจกรรมนอกเหนือหลักสูตร:
กรณีศึกษาของนักศึกษาแลกเปลี่ยน ณ สถาบันการศึกษานานชาติ
มหาวิทยาลัยรามคำแหง

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ABSTRACT

Newly arrived international students who are participating in their semester aboard may face a lot of difficulties in adapting to the new culture. This study aims at exploring and analyzing German exchange students' perceptions towards Thai culture, society, people's way of life and their perception towards the difficulty factors which they encountered during participating in Buddhist-related activities and ceremonies at a rural Dhamma Center. A total of nine German exchange students participated in this study. Data were gathered by means of a qualitative approach including open-ended questions, semi-structured interviews, and reflective reports. The thematic analysis techniques and qualitative data analysis (QDA) software package (NVivo 10) was employed to analyze the data. The finding showed that exposure to such extra-curricular activities had a positive impact on German exchange students' understanding and perception towards Thai culture, society, and people's way of life. However, there were two factors which caused exchange students to feel uncomfortable whilst participating in Buddhist-related activities and ceremonies: the Thai language barrier and practicing of the morning chant. These extra-curricular activities appeared to have beneficial effects on German exchange students regarding their cultural adjustment in Thailand. The results of this study might benefit the International Affairs Offices in all Thai tertiary educational institutions in order to enhance opportunities for international students to understand more comprehensively Thai culture, society, and its people.

Keywords: Cultural Assimilation, Exchange Students, Extra-curricular Activities

บทคัดย่อ

นักศึกษานานาชาติที่เพิ่งเดินทางเข้ามาเรียนในหลักสูตรแลกเปลี่ยนระหว่างประเทศในแต่ละภาคการศึกษา ในต่างประเทศนั้นจะเผชิญกับความยากลำบากในการปรับตัว การศึกษานี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อสำรวจและวิเคราะห์การรับรู้ของ นักศึกษาแลกเปลี่ยนชาวเยอรมันที่มีต่อวัฒนธรรม สังคม วิถีชีวิตร่องคนไทย และการรับรู้ที่มีต่อปัจจัยของความยากลำบาก ที่นักศึกษาแลกเปลี่ยนชาวเยอรมันได้เผชิญระหว่างการเข้าร่วมกิจกรรมและพิธีกรรมที่เกี่ยวข้องกับศาสนาพุทธที่สถานธรรม ในพื้นที่สังคมชนบท นักศึกษาแลกเปลี่ยนชาวเยอรมัน จำนวน 9 คน ได้เข้าร่วมการวิจัยในครั้งนี้ ข้อมูลถูกรวบรวมโดยใช้รีวิว วิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ ซึ่งเครื่องมือวิจัยประกอบด้วย คำถามปลายเปิด คำถามเพื่อใช้ในการสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้าง และรายงาน การเขียนบันทึก การวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลใช้หลักการวิเคราะห์แก่นสาระ และโปรแกรมสำเร็จรูปที่ใช้หลักการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูล เชิงคุณภาพที่เรียกว่าอีนวิโวสิบ (NVivo 10) ผลจากการศึกษาพบว่า การให้นักศึกษาแลกเปลี่ยนชาวเยอรมันได้มีโอกาสสัมผัส กิจกรรมนอกเหนือหลักสูตรดังกล่าว ส่งผลเชิงบวกต่อความเข้าใจและการรับรู้ที่มีต่อวัฒนธรรม สังคม และวิถีชีวิตร่องคนไทย อย่างไรก็ตามมีปัจจัยของความยากลำบากสองด้านที่เป็นสาเหตุทำให้นักศึกษาแลกเปลี่ยนชาวเยอรมันมีความรู้สึกอึดอัด ระหว่างการเข้าร่วมกิจกรรมและพิธีกรรมที่เกี่ยวข้องกับศาสนาพุทธ ซึ่งได้แก่อุปสมบทด้านภาษาและการฝึกปฏิบัติการ ทำวัตรเช้า ผลการวิจัยครั้งนี้นอกจากจะส่งผลกระทบเชิงบวกต่อการปรับตัวทางวัฒนธรรมของนักศึกษาแลกเปลี่ยน ชาวเยอรมันในประเทศไทยแล้วยังเป็นประโยชน์ต่อสำนักงานฝ่ายวิเทศสัมพันธ์ในสถาบันอุดมศึกษาเพื่ออำนวยความสะดวก และริเริ่มดำเนินการจัดกิจกรรมนอกเหนือหลักสูตร เพื่อสร้างโอกาสให้นักศึกษาชาวต่างชาติได้เข้าใจวัฒนธรรม สังคม และ คนไทยได้อย่างลึกซึ้งมากยิ่งขึ้นอีกด้วย

คำสำคัญ : การปรับตัวสู่วัฒนธรรม นักเรียนแลกเปลี่ยน กิจกรรมนอกเหนือหลักสูตร

Introduction

During the past few years, agreements on academic co-operation or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between The Institute of International Studies, Ramkhamhaeng University (IIS-RU) and other partner universities overseas for exchanging students have been increasing annually. Exchange students who participate in the exchange programs sometimes face a lot of difficulties in adjusting to living within the Thai culture and society. A number of students studying abroad are not able to adapt themselves easily to a new culture and society due to a number of factors such as culture shock, language barriers, psychological adjustment, lack of financial support and multiple other reasons (Otlu, 2010; Akhtar, 2012; Zhang, 2012; Mahmood, 2014). It is generally believed that perceived social support will reduce the relationship between acculturative stress and depression among international students, so those students reporting a high level of perceived social support have a lower association between acculturative stress and depression in comparison to those who report a lower level of perceived social support (Zhang, 2012). Therefore, encouraging international students to participate in extra-curricular activities in order to obtain the perceived social support could be one way to adapting themselves into the new culture and society.

Previous studies had put the emphasis on studying perception of both teachers and students towards teaching culture in foreign language classrooms (Prathoomthin, 2009; Ding and Teo, 2013). Furthermore, they have emphasized international students' adjustment and adaptation processes through examining the factors associated with acculturative stress (Thomas and Choi, 2006; Wei, et al., 2007; Yang and Clum, 1994; Ying and Han, 2006, cited in Zhang, 2012).

There are only a few studies which focus on the assessment of exchange students' perceptions connected to Thai cultural concepts through extra-curricular activities. This current study, therefore, enriches the field through exploring the use of this mechanism for their adjustment. Through employing qualitative methods of data collection, this small scale study aims at investigating German exchange students' perceptions towards Thai culture, society, and people's way of life and their perceptions towards cultural empathy whilst participating in Buddhist-related activities and ceremonies at a rural Dhamma Center. Results can be used to shape policy among tertiary education establishments, particularly the International Affairs Office, in obtaining better outcomes for exchange students.

Research Objectives

This study aims at focusing on the following two research objectives:

1. To explore the perceptions of German exchange students towards the Thai culture, society, and people's way of life through Buddhist-related activities and ceremonies at a rural Dhamma Center.
2. To study any difficulty factors which the German exchange students encountered while participating in these Buddhist-related activities and ceremonies at a rural Dhamma Center.

Literature Review

1. Culture

The term "culture" has been defined differently by numerous scholars and researchers based on several theories in various fields of study. Some of the viewpoints are summarized and given below.

The term "culture" is defined as the "collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede, 1994, cited in Oatey, 2012, p. 5). Alternatively, Oatey (2008) states "Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour" (Oatey, 2008, cited in Oatey, 2012, p. 2).

Moran (2001, p. 24) defines the term culture as "an evolving way of life of a group of persons, consisting of a shared set of practices associated with a shared set of products, based upon a shared set of perspectives on the world, and set within specific social contexts". According to Moran's (2001) definition of culture, there are five dimensions which can be identified.

Table 1: Moran's Five Dimensions of Culture

Five Dimensions of Culture	
Products	All artifacts produced or adopted by members of the culture.
Practices	The full range of actions and interactions that members of the culture carry out, individually or with others.
Perspectives	The perceptions, beliefs, values, and attitudes that underlie the products and that guide individuals and communities in the practice of their culture.
Communities	The specific social contexts, circumstance, and groups in which members carry out cultural practices.
Persons	The individual members who embody the culture and its communities in unique ways, such as a particular cultural identity, ways of life and others

2. Thai Culture and Buddhism

According to the study of Ding and Teo (2013), the Thai culture is based on the tenets of Buddhism, since Buddhism is claimed as the national religion (Ding and Teo, 2013). Buddhism is expressed in every aspect of Thai daily life. From birth to death, Buddhism is represented in religious ceremonies which are believed to bring happiness to life. For instance, it is included in birthdays, marriages, funerals, moving house, opening of business offices and even the buying of new vehicles (Chadchaidee, 1994, cited in Theerakittikul, 2008). Indeed, to the Thai nation as a whole, Buddhism has been the mainspring from which its culture and philosophy, art and literature, ethics and morality and many of its folkways and festivals have flowed (Theerakittikul, 2008). Kusalasaya (2006) states that Buddhism has established itself in Thailand over the centuries, and played an important role in all aspects of Thai people's way of life so that Thailand is often called 'The Land of Yellow Robes' by foreigners (Kusalasaya, 2006, p. 1). Komin (1990) reflects this view, pointing out that Thai cultural and spiritual dimensions are more or less derived from Buddhism, including traditional Thai values are being nice, kind, caring, considerate and polite (Siengthai and Vadhanasindhu, 1991, as cited in Theerakittikul, 2008).

3. Acculturation and Cultural Assimilation

The terms "acculturation" and "assimilation" can be defined simply as the cultural learning process of new comers who have become resident in the novel cultural environment of a host country. The two words seem to be interchangeable in their meanings and definitions. According to Organista, Marín and Chun (2010), these terms were utilized in different ways by two main fields of study. Anthropologists and sociologists utilize the terms "incorporation" or "assimilation" to refer to the concepts in literature, whereas psychologists use the term "acculturation". Indeed, the terms "cultural assimilation" and "cultural integration" are utilized extensively in contemporary research in the fields of sociology and anthropology (Organista, Marín and Chun, 2010). Nevertheless, the terms "acculturation" and "assimilation" appear to be interchangeable in their meanings and are used as such in this research.

Berry's model of individual acculturation is utilized in this study. According to his model acculturation strategies are based on attitudes toward learning a new culture and retaining the heritage (original) culture and may be defined sequentially (Organista, Marín and Chun, 2010). According to Berry (2003),

an individual's acculturation process can be described in four categories (Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis and Sam, 2011, pp. 320-321):

(1) Integration occurs when the individual maintains their own culture but is also eager to engage in daily interactions with the host;

(2) Separation refers to individuals choosing to maintain their own culture and avoid relationships with the host culture;

(3) Assimilation occurs when the individual ignores their own culture and values relationships and interacts with the host culture; and

(4) Marginalization refers to situation when the individuals neither values the home nor the host culture

Berry (2003) argues that integration indicates the lowest levels of stress with increasing levels up to marginalization (Organista, Marín and Chun, 2010).

Research Methodology

1. Participants

The participants of this study were selected through the purposive sampling method. The total numbers of participants are nine individuals, including six German exchange students who registered on an undergraduate exchange program under the learning agreement and academic collaboration with a partner university and three German students who registered on non-degree programs.

2. Research Instruments and Validation

In relation to the research instruments employed in this study, the triangulation approach for data collection provides a mechanism of reliability and validity to the findings. This study was carried out utilizing a qualitative methodology through the triangulation approach by collecting data through open-ended questions, semi-structured interview protocols, and reflective reports. To increase content validity, the researcher asked an expert who specializes in research methodology to examine the research tools. Moreover, the research instruments such as open-ended questions and the questions for semi-structured interview protocols were piloted by other three participants who were participating in the Buddhist-related activities in order to check the readability and understanding of all questions. All research instruments were constructed in English and validated by a native speaker.

3. Data Collection

Regarding data collection, the open-ended questions were sent via e-mail to all participants. According to semi-structured interview protocol, three German students were selected randomly.

After conducting the semi-structured interview protocols, a respondent return validation procedure was conducted systematically in order to improve the accuracy, validity, and credibility of the study as suggested by Carlson (Carlson, 2010). In other words, the information received from the semi-structured interviews was returned to respondents to check the correction of the transcription. This procedure ensured the accuracy, reliability, and richness to the preliminary data from the semi-structured interview protocol.

Moreover, all participants were voluntarily asked to write a reflective report regarding their perceptions and experiences at the end of the project. In addition, an informed-consent form was attached with this research instrument sent by e-mail in order to inform the participants concerning research procedure, ethics and confidentiality. For example, the demographic characteristics of all participants were not utilized in this study whilst quotes remained anonymous in order to protect the identity of participants. Importantly, all data gathered for this study was kept confidentially and destroyed within a specified period after the end of this small scale research project.

4. Data Analysis

The obtained data from the open-ended questions, the semi-structured interviews, and reflective reports was analyzed qualitatively using the method of thematic analysis. The researcher utilized a qualitative data analysis (QDA) software package (NVivo 10) through its three step procedure: importing, coding and analyzing rich text. To be precise, all obtained data and transcription were re-read to ensure complete understanding of the content and then analyzed by grouping into themes and categories.

Results and Discussions

Data was analyzed and interpreted in accordance with similarity of themes and patterns within each category. In order to analyze the data, it was grouped into four main categories: Thai culture and society, Thai people's way of life, self-adaptation to Thai culture and difficulty factors encountered by exchange students whilst participating in Buddhist-related activities and ceremonies at a rural Dhamma Center. Each of these categories is discussed in the following section and illustrated with respondent verbatim extracts.

Thai Culture and Society

The findings from qualitative parts revealed that Buddhist-related activities and ceremonies helped participants to understand about Thai culture and society more deeply. Two of respondents explained:

- *“Before participating at this project I wasn’t aware what Buddhism is all about. I just knew a few things, but I had never experienced Buddhism before going to the Dhamma Center. For me it was a great experience to see and learn what Buddhism is all about and participating actively in the morning chant, meditation etc. gave me deeper insight into the Buddhist religion and helped me to understand Thai culture and their religion much better.”*

- *“Being blessed by monks was very unusual but a great feeling. Thanks to this trip I can understand a lot better how Buddhism teaches life. It is a wonderful and philosophical religion and after knowing a lot more about the rituals and beliefs I can understand the Thai culture better than any book could explain.”*

Furthermore, two of respondents pointed out that Buddhist-related activities and ceremonies were very interesting to them. Additionally, they also perceived that Buddhism and Thai culture are closely related and inseparable. They claimed that have learnt a lot regarding Thai culture and the monks' way of life:

- “To be honest, I did not have any perception before the experience and when I read the schedule I could not really imagine what some activities might be, e.g. the walking back and forth. Afterwards I had mixed feelings. The mediation, morning chant, etc. were really interesting activities and I learned a lot about the Thai culture and the way of life of monks.”

- “Yes, the Buddhist religion and Thai culture are connected and inseparable. I think activities at the Dhamma Center were very beneficial and informative.”

For two of the respondents, the Buddhist life prolonging or longevity ceremony, was mentioned as special for them to participate in even though they did not understand all the messages conveyed by the monks during the ceremony. As can be seen from the following extracts, two respondents showed their sense of engagement to be a part of the ceremony:

- “The last day we had a ceremony with the head monk. He prayed for us and we were connected with a wood symbol. Very interesting, now we are all blessed by the monk. He gave us a bracelet.”

- “After this day I found some really good new friends. The next days we attended the life-prolonging ceremony, had some special ceremony to honor our parents and so on. Even when I didn’t understand what was going on I tried to understand it by the means and reactions of the people surrounding me and I was really impressed during this time and these days.”

It is worth noting that all respondents have similar ideas, stating that Buddhist-related activities and ceremonies at the Dhamma Center help them to understand Thai culture and society. It can be concluded that the group of nine German exchange students tried hard to be a part of activities and learn how to adapt themselves to the Thai culture and society.

Thai people’s Way of Life

According to the findings from the qualitative part, seven respondents mentioned that the Thai people’s way of life is affected by Buddhism. They understood that Buddhism plays an important role in their everyday life and society as a whole. It can be seen from some extracts of respondents’ comments as follows:

- “Yes, I think it helped me, because the whole life of the Thai people is affected by Buddhism and for that reason I was able to understand the actions of the Thai people better than before and to adapt to them. It is difficult to adapt to a culture when you do not know, why the people act like this.”

- “After the experience, many things are easier for me to understand, like the culture, behavior and the ceremonies. In my opinion it was an amazing experience. I got to know the Thai lifestyle better, especially the religion and tradition.”

- “I spent a lot of months and time here to learn more about people and culture. I think it’s very important to learn their culture and rituals of Buddhism so I will know more about Thai culture and Thailand. I also think that Thai people are strong in religion. Their beliefs are very strong compared to German people. The way that Thai people act is connected to their religion.”

Additionally, one respondent claimed that being a part of activities at the Dhamma Center helped their understanding of the importance of Buddhism and how it reflects Thai people's way of life. They also gave the insightful comment that both Buddhism and Thai culture are tightly related and inseparable. Importantly, one respondent claimed they had learnt more about people's way of life in the surrounding rural area. They mentioned that local people's lifestyles are simple; they have traditional values and a self-sufficient way of life. It can be seen from these two extracts of these respondents' comments:

- *"Thai culture and activities at Dhamma Center helped me to understand more about Thai culture. I think religion in Thailand is very important for Thai people. It depends on the religion that people believe and reflect the people's ways of life which is different than people who have not."*
- *"In the Wiang Haeng District, Chiang Mai Province people live a more elementary and quiet life and get along with simple resources, e.g. while building the earthen house. Thereby, I now appreciate my "modern" life more and more and have got a lot of respect towards the lifestyle of the monks and all the people that live in this area."*

In relation to the Buddhist monks and novices' way of life, four respondents pointed out that they had learnt many things relating to these groups particularly their behavior, ways of life and the way of practicing meditation. In addition, one respondent pointed out the monks' 227 rules, and in particular, the rule that the monks are not allowed to eat after midday. It can be seen from some extracts of respondents' comments as follows:

- *"It was quite good to see the monks' way of living and their behavior. In general it was a very good idea to share some days with people I didn't know before. My time there enriched and sensitized my thinking a lot."*
- *"The facility of the monks was incredible. It was close to nature and you could see how peaceful they had become."*
- *"During these days we learned so much about the life of a monk. For me as a German it was a revelation. I had never explored a real meditation of monks and it was so nice to participate."*
- *"For me as a Christian, everything at the Dhamma Center was a great experience. It was very interesting to learn so much about Buddhism and the monks and novices' ways of life. For me it would be impossible to learn almost three hundred rules. Most of all I was surprised that the Monks are allowed to take their last meal at 12.00 p.m. I have a great respect for their perseverance and I admire their way of life."*

It can be concluded that the Buddhist-related activities were helpful and informative for German exchange students. As mentioned earlier, the Thai people's way of life is based on the Buddhist religion, and hence an exposure to Buddhist-related activities helped German exchange students better understand the Thai culture and promote their cross cultural adaptation.

Self-Adaptation

According to the findings from the qualitative data, in addition to providing knowledge on Thai culture, the Dhamma Center experience also encouraged participants to wish to engage with Thai people and Buddhist related activities. This can be illustrated through extracts from two respondents', describing their being enthusiastic to get to know Thai people to help them understand Thai cultural concepts more deeply and adjust themselves to Thai society more easily. As two respondents stated:

- *"It was a great chance to get adapted to the 'Thai lifestyle' and to understand things I didn't recognize before."*
- *"It seems difficult and sounds strange at the beginning because I am Christian. However, when I get to know other people and participated in the Buddhist-related activities, these helped a lot for my adaptation and participation in the project."*

Apart from the information given above, one respondent pointed out that participating in Buddhist-related activities was a useful hands-on experience for them to learn and understand the way of exhibiting appropriate behaviors when interacting with Buddhist monks. Additionally, the knowledge obtained from these activities was beneficial for respondents to make a connection with Thai people appropriately and effectively. As two respondents pointed out:

- *"Yes, the activities are very helpful because I do not have experience or have spent much time in Thai culture and society. It's very helpful to learn more about it and to understand more about people and culture. This means to me a lot. As it is my first time to Thailand, I asked many questions. When I went to the temple and saw monks, I did not know that I was not allowed to touch them. I learnt so many things. After participating, I knew that it's restricted and I can make the connection with the Thai people too."*

In the similar way, one respondent mentioned that the knowledge gained from Buddhist-related activities and ceremonies had helped improve their intercultural skills and sensitivity. In particular, participating in activities with monks and novices from the Shan State in Myanmar, and fellow Thai students stimulated them to learn from other people who have different cultural backgrounds. As one respondent mentioned:

- *"I had the chance to get a deeper insight into the Buddhist religion, improving my intercultural skills, making the experience to work as a volunteer and work together in a multinational team with Thai students, German students and monks and novices from Thailand and Shan State."*

As can be seen from the findings of this analysis, participation in Buddhist-related activities and ceremonies at the Dhamma Center can have a positive effect on German exchange students' perceptions towards Thai culture, society and people's way of life. Moreover, the knowledge and experience obtained from the aforementioned activities could be advantageous and supportive for their adaptation while they were studying and residing in Thailand.

Difficulty Factors whilst Participating in Buddhist-related Activities at the Dhamma Center

It is found that the language barrier was one of the main concerns for all respondents while they were participating in the specific Buddhist-related activities and ceremonies. As can be seen from the extracts of five respondents below, an inability to comprehend events due to language was a drawback, and organizers need to consider this in any future excursions. As five respondents stated:

- *“Language barriers are the most difficult things for me. I did not understand the whole things from what monks said.”*
- *“It was very hard to understand Thai language but now I know more about Thai culture.”*
- *“For international students it wasn’t always easy to understand, so this should be considered next time.”*
- *“We couldn’t always understand what the head monk was saying but the supervisors did their best to help us understand what was happening. Being blessed by monks was very unusual but a great feeling.”*
- *“After this day I found some really good new friends. The next day we attended the life-prolonging ceremony, it had some special ceremony to honor our parents and so on. Even when I can’t understand what’s going on there I tried to understand it by the means and reactions of the people surrounding me and I was really impressed during this time and these days.”*

In addition, the researcher found that waking up in the early morning for morning chant, plus adopting the respect position of sitting for a long time on the floor while participating in the Buddhist ceremonies and facing the front of the Buddha images, monks and novices were difficult concepts for the participants to follow. As one respondent stated:

- *“I think I speak for all of us that it was very hard for us rising early to participate in the daily chanting and meditation ceremony. We learnt so much not only about their life, but also about ourselves. For me it’s very difficult to sit so long and it’s very quiet there to pray and sitting. Also, I was not allowed to put my feet in front of the Buddha image. It’s very uncomfortable at the first time. Generally, we do not have this practice in Germany.”*

It is worth mentioning that stakeholders should use appropriate and meaningful activities for international students. Providing intangible concept or religious-related activities might cause misunderstanding, confusion, and discomfort for international students. Practically, it is worth suggesting that providing various activities for international students to get actual experiences from villagers in rural areas will help students understand more deeply about Thai history and cultural heritage. It is important to note that providing extra-curricular activities for international students should be implemented and aligned with the institutional goals and be part of the overall student development program.

In addition to motivating and exposing international students to activities which relate to community development such as conserving natural resources and the environment with local people in rural areas, participation is also vital in ensuring the experiences are embedded. Such activities not only motivate students to learn a new culture through the local people’s way of life, but experiences gained from such activities will raise students’ awareness to be more public-minded and to devote themselves for community development and a sustainable society once they return to their homeland.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that German exchange students' perceptions towards the extra-curricular activities during the project were highly positive. According to Berry's model of an individual acculturation process it seems these students adapted themselves easily to Thai culture and society. They seemed to be enthusiastic to get involved to all activities with domestic students, local novice students, and monks. It can be summarised that all participants were in the acculturation process of integration which balanced their own culture with trying to learn new things from the new culture. As for the term 'integration', defined as the process which occurs when the individual maintains their own culture while also eager to engage in daily interactions with the host people (Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis, and Sam, 2011, p. 321), it can be seen from the extracts of one respondent:

- *"I am actually a Christian and this was the first time I have participated in a Buddhist ceremony and even if I couldn't understand the Thai language and I am not a Buddhist, I felt very welcomed and sheltered and comfortable with their religion."*

It is generally accepted that international students coming from different countries have their own culture, they own unique identity and they own different way of life. Learning in an overseas environment is not only about concentrating on the course content, but it is also learning about the host culture and its identity. Therefore, implementing and initiating meaningful extra-curricular activities for exchange students helps to promote and strengthen cross-cultural understanding and communication whilst assisting adjustment into a new cultural context.

Implication and Recommendation

1. Implication

The results of this study are useful and valuable for any tertiary educational institution seeking to be involved with trans-cultural exchanges. The results can be used to design, facilitate, and initiate extra-curricular activities for international students during their residency and study in Thailand. Practically, activities should expose international students to Thai culture, society and the people's way of life in rural areas.

2. Recommendation

Firstly, conducting pre-and-post questionnaires or other research instruments to collect data from exchange students before and after their participation in activities might be valuable to explore the changes in students' perceptions towards Thai culture, society and people's way of life as a result of their exposure. Secondly, future research might utilize a larger sample size of participants, and include exchange students from various nationalities, when drawing any conclusion and generalizations in this field of study.

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