

Chinese Student Mobility and the Capacity to Aspire: A New Wave of Self-Aspiration

NARITA CHAITHIMA

Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

Author email: naritac6@gmail.com

Article information	Abstract
Article history: Received: 29 Jan 2025 Last revised: 28 Aug 2026 Accepted: 29 Aug 2026 Available online: 31 Aug 2026	This article examines Chinese student mobility by focusing on mainland Chinese students pursuing higher education at Northern Thai universities. Moving beyond the limitations of the push-pull framework, the study applies Appadurai's (2004) concept of capacity to aspire to understand how educational decisions are socially constructed and developed through transnational mobility. Drawing on qualitative data from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the findings show that interactions between structural conditions in China and opportunities in Northern Thailand influence students' decisions. The study also demonstrates that students actively interpret these conditions through aspirations shaped by family expectations, social class, and prior experiences. By highlighting these dynamics, the study positions Northern Thailand as an emerging regional hub in global higher education and offers a reconceptualization of student mobility as a socially embedded and dynamic aspirational process. The findings have implications for internationalization strategies and student support systems in Thai higher education.
Keywords: Chinese student mobility Capacity to aspire Self-aspiration Northern Thai university English-medium programs	

INTRODUCTION

International student mobility in higher education has become an increasingly important feature of higher education over the past two decades. According to UNESCO (2026), the number of students pursuing higher education abroad increased from 2.1 million in 2000 and was estimated to be nearly 7.3 million in 2023, equivalent to about 3% of the global higher education student population. China has long been one of the major contributors to international student mobility. In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, 703,500 Chinese students went abroad to study (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). Although the pandemic subsequently disrupted international student mobility, recent figures illustrate that Chinese students continue to pursue education overseas and plan to study abroad. The latest official Chinese data report that 570,600 Chinese students went abroad to study in 2025 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2026). Even though this number is lower than the pre-pandemic level recorded in 2019, the scale of outbound mobility remained considerable and overseas education continues to be an important option for Chinese students. These changing patterns raise important questions about where Chinese students choose to study and what motivates them to pursue higher education abroad.

Alongside these changes in the scale of outbound mobility, Chinese students have also become more diverse in their choice of study destinations. While countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and other Western countries have traditionally attracted large numbers of Chinese students, destinations closer to their home country are receiving growing attention. Many countries, including Thailand, have become alternative destinations because of their relative affordability, geographical proximity, and increasing number of international programs (Cheng et al., 2020; Xiang & Shen, 2009). Students' decisions to study abroad are also shaped by pressures within China's education system, particularly the highly competitive National College Entrance Examination (*Gaokao*). For some students who are unable to enter their preferred universities or programs in China or have decided to go abroad, overseas study offers another possible route to higher education.

Within this changing landscape, Thailand has become an increasingly relevant destination for Chinese students, with Northern Thailand offering a distinctive setting for transnational higher education. Public universities in the region provide a range of internationally oriented programs that are relatively accessible to Chinese students. Yet, despite the growing presence of Chinese students, Northern Thailand has received limited attention in the literature on international student mobility. Previous studies have largely examined Chinese students in more established destinations or discussed their experiences in Thailand more broadly, leaving the specific role of Northern Thai universities in Chinese student mobility less understood.

Much of the literature on international student mobility has also drawn on the push-and-pull framework to explain why students choose particular destinations (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). This framework is useful for identifying structural conditions that encourage or discourage mobility, such as educational opportunities, costs, and destination characteristics. Research on mainland Chinese students further shows that destination choice can involve family considerations, with parents and students sometimes placing different levels of importance on particular factors when considering overseas study (Bodycott, 2009). However, these factors alone do not fully explain how students understand their choices or how their aspirations develop through their experiences. Less attention has been given to the ways students interpret available opportunities, negotiate family expectations and social circumstances, and imagine their future educational and career pathways.

To examine these processes, this study draws on Appadurai's (2004) concept of the *capacity to aspire* as its main analytical framework. Rather than viewing the decision to study abroad simply as a response to external conditions, this perspective considers aspiration as socially and culturally shaped. It therefore provides a useful way to explore how Chinese students' educational choices are connected not only to the opportunities available to them but also to their family backgrounds, social class, previous experiences, and the futures they imagine for themselves.

Northern Thailand provides a particularly useful context for examining these processes. The growing presence of Chinese students in the region is connected to broader changes in educational mobility, including the increasing involvement of families in decisions about overseas education. For many middle-class Chinese families, studying abroad can form part of

a longer-term educational strategy through which they seek to expand their children's future opportunities and possibilities for social mobility (Santasombat, 2022; Siriphon & Li, 2023). Examining students in this regional setting therefore provides an opportunity to understand how family resources, structural conditions, and individual aspirations come together in shaping educational mobility.

Accordingly, the research questions are: 1) Why do Chinese students choose to pursue higher education in Northern Thai universities? and 2) How are their aspirations shaped, supported, and further developed through educational mobility? By addressing these questions, this research aims to contribute to existing literature in three key ways. First, it broadens the application of the capacity to aspire to the study of transnational education mobility. Second, it provides empirical insights into Northern Thailand as an emerging regional hub for international education. Third, it moves beyond the traditional push-and-pull framework by emphasizing student agency and the dynamic processes through which aspirations are formed and transformed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transnational mobility, particularly in education, has become one of the most prominent forms of global mobility in recent decades. It refers not only to the movement of students across national borders but also to the circulation of educational programs, institutional partnerships, and policy frameworks between countries (Chen, 2015; Li et al., 2021). Often framed as an investment in human capital (Becker, 1993), transnational education mobility is closely linked to broader processes of globalization, technological advancement, and shifting geopolitical relations. At the same time, it remains a contested field, with ongoing debates surrounding issues of quality and equivalence, cultural influence, and the commercialization of education. These debates highlight the increasingly complex and uneven nature of global higher education.

The concept of the capacity to aspire

Appadurai's (2004) concept of the capacity to aspire was developed within the context of globalization and social inequality. It emphasizes that aspirations are not simply individual desires, but are culturally and socially shaped capacities. The capacity to aspire refers to the ability to imagine possible futures and to navigate pathways toward achieving them. Importantly, this capacity is unevenly distributed across social groups and is deeply influenced by access to resources, social networks, and cultural knowledge.

In educational contexts, this concept helps explain why students from different backgrounds pursue different pathways. Students with greater access to economic, cultural, and social capital are often better equipped to map out their futures and make strategic educational choices. In contrast, those with fewer resources may have more limited or "unmapped" aspirations (Appadurai, 2004; Bok, 2010). This perspective shifts attention away from purely structural explanations and toward the ways in which aspirations are formed, negotiated, and realized within specific social contexts.

Chinese student mobility in a changing context

The rapid increase in Chinese students studying abroad is closely tied to China's economic growth and its integration into the global education system (Henze & Zhu, 2012). Existing research shows that Chinese student mobility is diverse and evolving. Earlier studies often focused on learning styles, adaptation challenges, and academic performance in Western contexts (Chen & Ross, 2015; Hansen, 2015). More recent work has expanded this perspective by examining transnational identities, global aspirations, and the role of education in China's broader engagement with globalization (Liu, 2012; Ong & Nonini, 1997).

A significant strand of research highlights the role of middle-class families in shaping educational mobility. For many families, overseas education represents a strategic investment in cultural and social capital, particularly through access to English-language education and internationally recognized degrees (Fong, 2011; Xiang & Shen, 2009). At the same time, Chinese students are increasingly seen as active agents rather than passive recipients of global education flows, navigating complex pathways shaped by both structural constraints and personal aspirations.

In recent years, attention has also shifted toward alternative destinations beyond traditional Western countries. Studies on Chinese students in Thailand emphasize factors such as affordability, cultural familiarity, and regional proximity (Kang et al., 2019; Jiakai, 2018; Ye, 2020). Other research explores issues of social support, adaptation, and Thailand's growing role as an educational hub (Lertpusit, 2022; Lin & Kingminghae, 2014; Siricharoen, 2023). These studies suggest that Southeast Asia is becoming an increasingly important site for transnational education mobility.

Conceptual framework

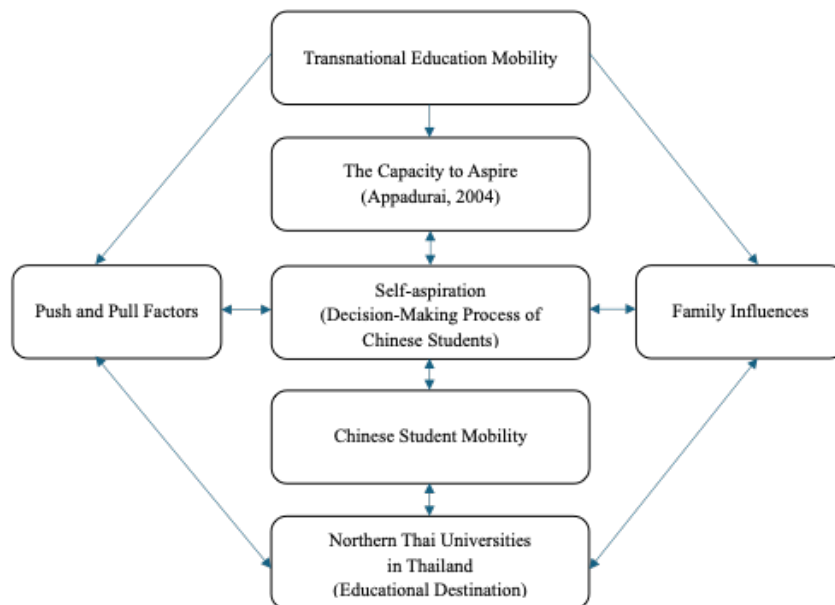


Figure 1 The conceptual framework

This study uses Appadurai's (2004) concept of the *capacity to aspire* to understand how Chinese students develop and pursue their educational aspirations through transnational mobility. Rather than treating aspiration as a purely individual ambition, the framework views it as socially shaped. Students may have their own educational goals, but their ability to imagine and pursue particular futures is influenced by family expectations, socioeconomic background, access to resources, and the opportunities available to them.

Within this framework, the decision to study in Northern Thailand develops through the interaction between students' aspirations and the conditions surrounding their educational choices. Pressures within China's education system may encourage some students to consider alternatives, while family support, financial resources, previous experiences, and access to information can influence which options appear possible. Northern Thai universities form part of this process by providing an educational setting that students may view as relatively accessible, geographically close to China, and connected to international study opportunities.

The framework therefore goes beyond explaining mobility only in terms of push-and-pull factors. These factors remain useful for identifying conditions that may encourage students to leave China or attract them to Thailand, but they do not fully explain how students interpret these conditions or how their aspirations change over time. By bringing the *capacity to aspire* into the analysis, this study considers both the structural conditions surrounding mobility and the agency of students in imagining, negotiating, and pursuing their educational futures. Northern Thailand is examined within this framework as an emerging regional destination where educational mobility can create new experiences and, in turn, reshape students' aspirations for further study, employment, and other future pathways.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative longitudinal research design (Neale, 2020) to explore the motivations, aspirations, and lived experiences of Chinese students from mainland China who choose to study in Northern Thailand, with particular attention to how they interpret their educational journeys within specific social and cultural contexts.

Research sites and participants

This study was conducted at three public universities in Northern Thailand: Chiang Mai University, Chiang Rai Rajabhat University, and Mae Fah Luang University. These institutions were selected not only because of their substantial and growing numbers of Chinese students, but also because they represent different types of higher education institutions within the region. This variation allows for a more comprehensive analysis of how institutional contexts shape students' decisions and experiences.

Chiang Mai University is represented as a leading research-oriented university attracting students who seek academic recognition and broader academic opportunities. Chiang Rai Rajabhat University reflects a locally oriented institution emphasizing community engagement,

while Mae Fah Luang University represents a more internationalized model designed for global students. These differences are analytically significant, as they allow the study to examine how aspirations are shaped and developed across diverse educational environments.

A total of 30 Chinese students participated in the study, including 15 undergraduate and 15 Master's students. The participants comprised 16 women and 14 men, aged between 20 and 31 years. They came from six provinces and autonomous regions in mainland China and represented a range of academic disciplines (Table 1). Most undergraduate participants were enrolled in four-year programs, generally during 2018–2022, while the Master's participants typically studied during 2020–2023. All participants were enrolled in long-term degree programs, allowing the study to examine their academic and social experiences over an extended period. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants across the three universities.

Table 1
Details of participants

Participants	Details
Total participants	30
Gender	16 women and 14 men
Age	20–31 years
Level of study	15 undergraduate students and 15 Master's students
Typical period of study	Undergraduate: approximately 4 years (2018–2022); Master's: approximately 3 years (2020–2023)
Field of study	Social Sciences, Thai Language and Culture, Thai Language, English, Economics, Business Administration, Chinese for International Business, Aviation and Logistics, Tourism Management, Software Engineering, Computer Science, Engineering, and Education
Regions of origin in China	Yunnan, Sichuan, Fujian, Guangxi, Henan, and Shaanxi
Study location	Chiang Mai University, Chiang Rai Rajabhat University, and Mae Fah Luang University

Note: All participants were mainland Chinese students enrolled in long-term undergraduate or Master's degree programs. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities. The periods shown indicate the typical duration of study rather than continuous physical residence in Thailand.

Research positionality

The researcher's role can be described as a partial insider with familiarity with the Thai educational environment and prior interactions with many Chinese students. This positionality facilitated access and helped build trust with participants. Interviews were conducted in multiple languages (Chinese, English, and Thai). Throughout the research process, reflexivity was maintained to consider how the researcher's background, language use, and interactions with participants may have influenced data collection and interpretation.

Data collection

Data collection was conducted longitudinally in multiple phases, beginning with face-to-face fieldwork in 2018. Fieldwork resumed from 2020 onward and continued through subsequent interview and follow-up phases. During the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions on face-to-face interaction required the flexible use of both in-person and online methods. This multi-phase design enabled the researcher to trace changes in students' educational experiences, aspirations, and future expectations over time. Three main methods were used as follows:

In-depth interviews were used to explore students' personal experiences, motivations, and aspirations. These interviews were flexible in format, allowing participants to speak freely and raise issues that were important and interesting to them. Interviews took place in various settings, including cafes, libraries, and online platforms such as WeChat. Participants could choose to speak in Chinese, English, or Thai. All interviews were recorded with consent and later anonymized using pseudonyms.

Focus group discussions were conducted to capture shared experiences and common challenges among Chinese students. They were grouped by level of study and academic program to encourage more relevant discussions. Topics included academic adjustment, language barriers, social integration, and strategies for adapting to life in Northern Thailand.

Online interviews became particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic, when face-to-face meetings were restricted. Although online communication occasionally involved difficulties such as unstable internet connections and limitations in platform access, it allowed the researcher to remain in contact with participants who had returned to China. For some participants, joining interviews from familiar home environments also made it easier to speak openly about their experiences.

Data were analyzed using a thematic approach. The analysis proceeded through several stages. First, all interview transcripts were read multiple times, and open coding was applied to identify recurring concepts and patterns. Second, these codes were grouped into broader thematic categories based on similarities and relationships across participants. Third, the themes were interpreted through the lens of the *capacity to aspire* (Appadurai, 2004), focusing on how aspirations are socially shaped and how they develop through educational mobility. Finally, themes were refined through an iterative process of comparison across different data sources, including interviews and focus groups, to ensure consistency and analytical depth.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion are organized around two research questions. The first section examines the structural and contextual conditions that influence Chinese students' decisions to pursue higher education at Northern Thai universities. The second explores how their aspirations are shaped, supported, and developed through their experiences of educational

mobility. This analysis considers how structural conditions, institutional opportunities, family resources, and students' lived experiences interact in shaping their educational pathways.

1. Why do Chinese students choose to pursue higher education at Northern Thai universities?

The participants' decisions to pursue higher education in Northern Thailand were shaped by several interconnected conditions. These included their experiences within China's education system, financial considerations, and the academic and practical opportunities available abroad. As summarized in Table 2, these conditions can be grouped into academic, economic, sociocultural, and political dimensions. The findings show that the decision to study in Northern Thailand developed through two related stages: for some students, experiences in China encouraged them to consider education abroad, while the conditions available in Thailand made Northern Thai universities a viable destination.

Table 2
Contextual conditions shaping Chinese students' decisions to study at Northern Thai universities

Factors	Challenges in China	Opportunities in Northern Thailand
Academic	- Intense competition in education - Limited opportunities in niche fields - Rigid structure	- English-medium programs and international education with a foreign degree - Opportunities for English as a second language acquisition - Less competitive academic environment - Specialized fields of study
Economic	- High costs of studying international programs - Inequality	- Affordable tuition fees and living costs - Business opportunities
Sociocultural	Stressful social and academic environment	- Proximity and cultural familiarity - Word-of-mouth recommendation
Political	Geopolitical tensions with Western countries	Supportive visa policies

Gaokao pressure and limited opportunities in China

For some participants, the possibility of studying abroad emerged from their experiences within China's highly competitive education system. The National College Entrance Examination (*Gaokao*) was particularly important for students whose examination results restricted access to the universities or programs they preferred. In these cases, overseas education offered another possible pathway rather than an end to their educational ambitions. Wei described how her examination experience influenced her decision:

Gaokao score means everything in my life. My score is not high enough, so my options in a Chinese university become very limited. Even though I tried my best, my teacher suggested that I should study abroad.

(Wei, undergraduate student in Thai language and culture, in-depth interview, February 2022)

Wei's experience reflects concerns also expressed by other participants whose examination results narrowed the educational options they perceived to be available in China. The *Gaokao*,

however, did not automatically lead students to study abroad. Rather, it encouraged some of them to look beyond the options available at home and consider other educational pathways. In this sense, academic competition operated as a structural “push” factor, as described in the push-and-pull framework (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), but it did not by itself explain where students eventually chose to study. The choice of destination involved a different set of considerations.

Thailand and Northern Thailand as accessible study destinations

When participants considered possible overseas destinations, practical feasibility became an important part of their decision-making. Cost was one of the considerations frequently mentioned in their accounts. Several participants viewed tuition fees and living expenses in Northern Thailand as more manageable than those in many Western destinations. This made studying abroad financially possible for students whose families could support overseas education but could not necessarily afford more expensive destinations.

Financial considerations were only one part of the decision. Participants also referred to Thailand’s geographical proximity to China, cultural familiarity, admission procedures, and the availability of international programs. Access to information also mattered. Teachers, recruitment agencies, university networks, and institutional partnerships helped some students learn about available programs and navigate the application process. Kun explained:

The agency, with the support of the teacher, introduced the list of universities to me. It was easier to apply compared to universities in other countries.

(Kun, Master’s student in Economics, in-depth interview, February 2022)

Academic opportunities provided another reason for choosing Northern Thailand. Participants considered not only whether they could enter a university, but also what they could gain from studying there. Specialized programs, practical training, and opportunities for language development were particularly relevant to students whose fields of study were closely connected to Thailand. Fang, a student from Yunnan, explained why these opportunities influenced her choice:

I was drawn to Thailand because of its strong tourism industry and well-established reputation as a tourist destination. Northern Thai University offers unique courses in my field, along with internship programs with local hotels and tour companies. This practical exposure is not as readily available in similar programs in China. Another reason is that my study time in Thailand is a chance to improve my English skills and learn Thai as a third language.

(Fang, undergraduate student in Tourism Management, in-depth interview, September 2020)

Fang’s account shows that Northern Thailand was not chosen simply because it was less expensive. Participants evaluated the destination in terms of what it could offer academically and practically, including specialized study, internships, international programs, and language

development. These opportunities, together with manageable costs, geographical proximity, and support during the application process, made Northern Thailand an attainable option for different groups of students.

These findings are consistent with previous research identifying affordability and educational opportunities as important considerations for Chinese students choosing Thailand (Lertpusit, 2022). However, the participants' accounts also show that destination choice cannot be explained by any single "pull" factor. Northern Thailand became attractive through a combination of conditions that students considered relevant to their educational needs and future plans. The push-and-pull framework therefore helps identify the conditions surrounding mobility (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), but the findings also point to the need to understand how students interpret these conditions and connect them to what they hope to achieve through overseas education.

2. How are aspirations shaped and developed through educational mobility?

The interviews show that students' aspirations continued to develop throughout their educational journeys. Family background influenced what students initially hoped to achieve and the choices available to them. At the same time, their experiences in Thailand introduced them to new academic, social, and professional possibilities. As a result, studying abroad was not simply the outcome of an aspiration formed before departure. It was also a process through which students reconsidered their goals and future plans.

Social class and family support as conditions of aspiration

Family was an important part of students' decisions to study abroad. Most participants received support from their parents or relatives, but the kind of support they received varied considerably. Some families were able to provide financial support as well as information and personal connections, while others had fewer resources and had to make considerable sacrifices. These differences affected how students planned their education and what they expected to gain from studying abroad.

Muchen, a Software Engineering student from Sichuan, came from an upper-middle-class family. His father was a civil engineer and business owner, while his mother was a retired English teacher who later opened a private language institute. Both parents were closely involved in his education and helped him prepare for studying abroad. Muchen recalled:

Education has always been the priority in my family. My dad runs his own company, so he's always pushed me to follow in his footsteps and think long-term about my future. My mom, being an English teacher, made sure I learned the language early on and encouraged me to be fluent. When we started discussing studying abroad, my parents were fully supportive, especially my mom. She took charge of researching information and making connections while my dad backed her up. Honestly, I did very little—just expressed my desire.

(Muchen, undergraduate student in Software Engineering,
in-depth interview, August 2021)

For Muchen, studying abroad was something his family could actively help him pursue. Their support went beyond paying for his education. His mother's background in English teaching helped prepare him linguistically, while his parents also searched for information and used their connections to support his plans. He therefore had access to several kinds of family resources when making the move to study abroad.

Fei's experience was different. She was a Master's student from Fujian and came from a lower-middle-class family. Her father had worked as a bus driver and her mother as an assistant nurse. Her parents supported her wish to study abroad, but the family could not provide the same level of financial support. Fei had to look for other ways to make her plan possible:

My family supported me in pursuing my education even though they had little money. I knew we couldn't afford the expensive university abroad, but I was determined to find a way. We talked about it seriously after I explained the details. They worried about the cost at first but later understood my dream abroad. My dad couldn't help me financially after he stopped working due to his serious back pain, but they encouraged me to take this chance. I later applied for scholarships and worked part-time to make it possible.

(Fei, Master's student in Thai language, in-depth interview, June 2020)

Muchen and Fei both wanted to pursue education abroad and both received support from their families. What differed was the range of resources available to them. Muchen could rely heavily on his parents throughout the process, whereas Fei had to combine family encouragement with scholarships and part-time work. Their experiences suggest that social class did not simply determine who had aspirations to study abroad. Instead, it affected the ways in which those aspirations could be pursued.

This difference can be understood through Appadurai's (2004) concept of the *capacity to aspire*. Aspirations do not develop separately from people's social circumstances. Having access to financial resources, information, and supportive networks can make it easier to explore different possibilities and act on them. Students with fewer resources may have equally strong aspirations, but turning those aspirations into reality can require more effort, negotiation, and sacrifice. This distinction can be seen clearly in the different pathways taken by Muchen and Fei.

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital also helps explain these differences. Muchen's family could draw on more than economic resources. His mother's educational background and early support for his English learning provided cultural resources, while the family's ability to find information and make connections provided social resources. Fei had fewer resources of this kind available to her and relied more heavily on her own efforts, scholarships, and part-time work. In both cases, family support mattered, but the resources that could be used to support educational mobility were different.

English language and skills as strategic aspirations

English language development was an important part of how many participants thought about their future. They did not see English simply as a subject to be studied for a degree. During the interviews and focus group discussions, students often connected English proficiency with employment, further education, and the ability to communicate in international settings. For some, studying in an English-medium program in Northern Thailand offered a chance to develop these skills while pursuing a degree in a field that interested them. As one student from an English major shared,

I chose to study here mainly to improve my English. It's really important for getting a good job, whether in China or abroad. Studying in Thailand gives me the chance to be in an English program and interact with international peers, which helps me grow both academically and socially. My program matches my interests, and at the same time, I get a foreign degree—something that's not easy to find back home. Plus, by the time I graduate, I can confidently say I have a second language.

(Dong Dong, undergraduate student in English language studies,
in-depth interview, October 2021)

For this student, improving English was closely connected to both education and future employment. Other participants looked further ahead. More than half discussed the possibility of continuing their education in a Western country after completing their studies in Thailand. For them, studying in Northern Thailand was not necessarily the final stage of their educational journey. It could provide time to improve their English, become familiar with an international learning environment, and prepare for another move in the future. One English major described this plan:

Studying in Thailand is just the first step for me. I see it as a way to improve my English and get used to an international learning environment before applying to universities in Western countries. It's a more affordable option, and by the time I graduate, I'll have better language skills and a stronger foundation to continue my studies or work.

(Junki, undergraduate student in English, focus group discussion, December 2021)

Participants also compared these experiences with the way they had previously learned English in China. Five students in Economics and Tourism commented that, "In China, we learn English in the classroom but rarely use it outside." They described much of their previous English learning as oriented toward examinations, vocabulary, grammar, reading, and writing, with fewer opportunities to use English in everyday communication. Their experiences in Northern Thailand were different because English was used not only in class but also in interactions with international students and within their academic programs.

Similar experiences have been reported among Chinese students studying in Thailand. Nomnian (2018a) found that differences in English learning and teaching environments in China and Thailand shaped how Chinese students experienced and used English during their overseas studies. Exposure to a more international learning environment may also provide

opportunities for students to use English across linguistic and cultural contexts (Nomnian, 2018b).

These accounts show that English had a practical value for participants, but it was also tied to how they imagined their future. Better English could support a range of possibilities, including employment, further study, and mobility beyond Thailand. In this sense, language learning became part of a longer educational strategy rather than an outcome of the degree alone. From Bourdieu's (1986) perspective, English proficiency can also be understood as a form of cultural and linguistic capital that students hoped to use in future academic and professional settings. Their experiences further show how aspirations could change during mobility: studying in Thailand opened up possibilities that, for some students, extended beyond Thailand itself.

Narratives of success, liberation, and cosmopolitan learning

Students' aspirations were also influenced by what they had seen and heard from people around them, as well as by their own experiences of mobility. Stories shared by relatives, friends, and senior students gave participants examples of what studying abroad might lead to. Previous visits to Thailand also made the country more familiar, while living and studying away from home gave some students space to think differently about their personal lives and futures.

Imagination of academic and economic success

For some participants, people who had already studied or worked in Thailand provided an important point of reference. Their experiences made educational and career possibilities in Thailand easier to imagine. Two Economics students recalled stories that had influenced how they viewed studying there:

My aunt often shared stories about her academic life in Thailand, describing how relaxed and happy she felt. She particularly enjoyed the food and how easily she adapted to the cultural similarities between Thailand and China. She also spoke highly of the supportive Chinese community in her university town, which was both welcoming and kind. On top of that, her export business in Thailand is now well-organized and thriving.

My senior had studied at a Northern Thai university. Our advisor contacted a Thai professor and introduced her to the head of the faculty. She had been highly recommended and famous. She secured a job with a high salary at a private university in Thailand. Her story is one of success that our advisor often shares with pride.

(Undergraduate and Master's students, focus group discussion, March 2022)

These stories gave students examples of what could happen after studying in Thailand. The aunt's experience connected education with business opportunities, while the senior's experience showed a possible route from overseas study to employment. Importantly, these were not distant examples. They came from people within the students' own social circles, making similar outcomes appear more achievable.

This finding can be understood through Ray's (2006) concept of the *aspirational window*. People often form aspirations by observing the lives and achievements of others who are socially relevant to them. In the participants' accounts, relatives and senior students helped widen this window by providing concrete examples of educational, professional, and economic possibilities. Their stories did not determine what participants would do, but they gave them a clearer sense of what studying in Thailand might make possible.

Seeking personal freedom abroad

For a smaller group of participants, studying abroad also offered greater distance from expectations at home. Two undergraduate students in English spoke about wanting more independence, while one Master's student described feeling pressure concerning marriage and family responsibilities. She recalled:

I heard my parents talking about my future as an adult woman. They expected me to follow the traditional Chinese path—secure a stable job, marry a respectable man, and uphold the family lineage. It felt outdated and confining. The only way to escape from these expectations was to put distance between us—to leave home and create a life on my own path.

(Ling Ling, Master's student in Economics, focus group discussion, September 2020)

For this participant, studying abroad was not only an educational decision. Being away from home gave her physical and social distance from expectations that she found restrictive. This experience is similar to Martin's (2018) study of Chinese women studying in Australia, which describes overseas study as a space in which young women can reconsider expectations surrounding youth, gender, and intimacy. Fong (2011) likewise shows that overseas education can be associated with greater personal autonomy among Chinese students. In the present study, this was not a motivation shared by everyone, but it was important for participants who connected mobility with greater control over their personal futures.

Developing cosmopolitan knowledge

Other participants valued studying abroad because it allowed them to encounter people and ways of life beyond what they had experienced in China. For them, international education was not limited to gaining a degree. Learning through everyday encounters with different cultures was also part of what they hoped to gain. A Tourism Management student explained:

Learning from textbooks alone isn't enough to become a global citizen. Without real-world experiences, the knowledge feels incomplete. My journey taught me more than just facts—it gave me insight into how people live, think, and interact across different cultures.

(Pete, Master's student in Tourism Management, in-depth interview, May 2020)

This account shows how the meaning of education could expand through mobility. Academic knowledge remained important, but the student also valued learning through interaction and

everyday experience. Exposure to different languages, social practices, and cultural settings gave some participants a broader understanding of what international education could offer. Their aspirations therefore extended beyond obtaining an overseas qualification to include personal development and a greater ability to participate in international environments.

Previous experiences in Thailand

For some participants, Thailand was already familiar before they enrolled at university. Exchange programs, family holidays, and previous visits allowed them to experience the country before making a longer-term commitment to study there. Two Business students described how these earlier experiences influenced their decisions:

I found the Thai education system to be much more flexible and less pressured. I enjoyed my studies in a way that I hadn't experienced before during my exchange program in Thailand. The curriculum was more relaxed, and the professors made me feel free and independent.

I travel to Thailand more than three times a year, and finally, I was here for a long period.

(Master's students in Business Administration, focus group discussion, June 2021)

Previous experience made Thailand less unfamiliar as a study destination. Rather than making a decision based only on information provided by universities, agencies, or other people, these students could draw on their own experiences of the country. An exchange program gave one participant direct experience of a different learning environment, while repeated travel gave another a sense of familiarity with everyday life in Thailand. These experiences became part of the knowledge students used when deciding whether they could imagine themselves living and studying there for a longer period.

Across these accounts, aspiration developed through both social relationships and personal experience. Students drew on the experiences of people they knew, their own previous mobility, and the new perspectives they encountered while living away from home. This adds another dimension to the *capacity to aspire* (Appadurai, 2004): the futures students imagined were not formed only through family resources or socioeconomic position. They were also shaped by the people, places, and experiences that expanded their sense of what might be possible.

Entrepreneurial aspirations

For some participants, studying in Thailand opened up possibilities that they had not necessarily considered before departure. As they became more familiar with local communities and cross-border activities, some began to notice opportunities for using their language skills, cultural knowledge, and personal networks in business. One Business student described how an idea emerged from his everyday experience in Thailand:

I noticed that many Chinese tourists and expats in Thailand struggled with communication, especially in business and hospitality. That's when it hit me—why not start a small consulting service to help them? With just my laptop and a WeChat account, I began offering translation and marketing services to local businesses looking to attract Chinese customers. As I shared my idea with friends, they got on board, and together, we started helping Thai businesses improve their presence on Chinese platforms like WeChat and Xiaohongshu. What started as a small side project quickly grew into something bigger. Now, I've built strong partnerships with Thai business owners, and I'm excited to see where this journey takes me next.

(Ai, undergraduate student in Business Administration,
in-depth interview, February 2023)

His experience shows how an idea developed through everyday encounters in Thailand. What began with recognizing a communication problem gradually became a small business activity that drew on his language ability, familiarity with Chinese digital platforms, and relationships with Thai businesses. In this case, studying abroad created opportunities not only to gain academic knowledge but also to recognize ways in which that knowledge and experience could be used outside the university.

A similar pattern can be seen in Haoran's experience. While studying Thai language and culture, he became interested in opportunities involving translation, cultural consulting, trade, and online selling between China and Thailand. His plans grew out of the knowledge and connections he developed while studying in the country. Rather than seeing his degree as the only outcome of overseas education, he began to consider how what he had learned in Thailand might be used in future work or business.

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital helps explain this process. The language skills, cultural knowledge, and social connections developed through studying abroad could acquire value beyond the university. For these participants, such resources began to take on economic value when they were used to identify business opportunities, provide services, or build connections across China and Thailand. This was not the experience of every participant, but these cases show how educational mobility could lead some students to imagine futures that had not been part of their original study plans.

CONCLUSION

This study examined why Chinese students choose to pursue higher education in Northern Thailand and how their aspirations develop through educational mobility. The findings show that these decisions cannot be explained by a single factor. Academic competition in China encouraged some students to consider studying abroad, while the affordability, proximity, international programs, and practical opportunities available in Northern Thailand made the region a realistic destination. Yet students did not respond to these conditions in the same way. Their choices were also shaped by family circumstances, previous experiences, social relationships, and what they hoped to achieve through studying abroad.

The study also shows that aspirations continued to develop after students had begun their educational journeys. Family support played an important role, but the resources available to students differed across socioeconomic backgrounds. Some could rely on financial support, information, and family networks, while others depended more heavily on scholarships, part-time work, and personal effort. At the same time, experiences in Thailand introduced students to possibilities that went beyond obtaining a degree. English-language development, international exposure, greater personal independence, and, for some, entrepreneurial opportunities became part of how they imagined their futures.

These findings extend Appadurai's (2004) concept of the *capacity to aspire* to the context of transnational education mobility. They show that aspiration is not simply a personal desire that exists before students move abroad. It develops within particular social circumstances and can change as students encounter new people, places, and opportunities. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital further helps explain why students differed in their ability to act on these aspirations. Economic, cultural, linguistic, and social resources shaped the pathways available to them, while educational mobility itself created opportunities to develop and use new resources.

Northern Thailand is particularly important in this discussion because it shows how regional destinations can become meaningful within changing patterns of international student mobility. For the participants in this study, Northern Thailand was not simply a less expensive alternative to Western destinations. Its combination of geographical proximity, accessible programs, language learning, practical experience, and connections between China and Thailand offered students different ways of pursuing their educational and future goals. Focusing on this regional setting therefore broadens our understanding of Chinese student mobility beyond the more commonly studied Western destinations.

The findings also have implications for universities seeking to attract and support international students. Recruitment and admission are only part of the process. Students' experiences suggest the importance of academic programs that connect learning with language development, practical experience, and future career opportunities. Universities may also benefit from providing clearer academic and social support for students from different financial and educational backgrounds and from strengthening appropriate institutional links with universities and educational networks in China.

This study is limited to 30 Chinese students studying at three public universities in Northern Thailand, and its findings are therefore not intended to represent all Chinese students in Thailand. Future research could examine whether similar patterns appear in other regions, institutions, or groups of international students. Following students beyond graduation would also provide a better understanding of how aspirations change over time and whether the language skills, networks, and other resources developed through overseas education are eventually used in employment, entrepreneurship, further education, or continued mobility.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is based on research conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation and was supported by The Royal Golden Jubilee Ph.D. Programme (RGJ-Ph.D. Programme) and The Thailand Research Fund (TRF): Scholarships for Thai Students. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor and advisory committee for their guidance, support, and understanding throughout the research process. I am also grateful to everyone who contributed to and supported this research.

THE AUTHOR

Narita Chaithima is a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Thailand. Her research interests include transnational education, international student mobility, educational aspirations, and cross-cultural learning, with a particular focus on Chinese students in Thailand and the broader Southeast Asian context.

naritac6@gmail.com

REFERENCES

- Appadurai, A. (2004). The capacity to aspire: Culture and the terms of recognition. In V. Rao & M. Walton (Eds.), *Culture and public action* (pp. 59–84). Stanford University Press.
- Becker, G. S. (1993). *Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education* (3rd ed.). University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226041223.001.0001>
- Bodycott, P. (2009). Choosing a higher education study abroad destination: What mainland Chinese parents and students rate as important. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 8(3), 349–373. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240909345818>
- Bok, J. (2010). The capacity to aspire to higher education: ‘It’s like making them do a play without a script’. *Critical Studies in Education*, 51(2), 163–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508481003731042>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
- Chen, P. Y. (2015). Transnational education: Trend, modes of practices and development. *International Journal of Information and Education Technology*, 5(8), 634–647. <https://doi.org/10.7763/IJiet.2015.V5.581>
- Chen, Y., & Ross, H. (2015). “Creating a home away from home”: Chinese undergraduate student enclaves in US higher education. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 44(3), 155–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261504400308>
- Cheng, B., Lin, L., & Fan, A. (2020). *The new journey to the west: Chinese students’ international mobility*. Springer.
- Fong, V. (2011). *Paradise redefined: Transnational Chinese students and the quest for flexible citizenship in the developed world*. Stanford University Press.
- Hansen, A. S. (2015). The temporal experience of Chinese students abroad and the present human condition. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 44(3), 49–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261504400304>
- Henze, J., & Zhu, J. (2012). Current research on Chinese students studying abroad. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 7(1), 90–104. <https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2012.7.1.90>
- Jiakai, X. (2018). *Factors influencing Chinese students’ decision to study in Thai universities around Bangkok, Thailand*. [Independent study, Bangkok University]. BU Research. <http://dspace.bu.ac.th/handle/123456789/3526>

- Kang, S., Yossuck, P., Panyadee, C., & Ek-lem, B. (2019). Influencing factors of cross-cultural adaptation process of Chinese students studying in the Upper Northern Thai universities. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 10(2), 111–120. <https://doi.org/10.2478/mjss-2019-0021>
- Lertpusit, S. (2022). Driving Thailand to become a regional education hub: An analysis of the factors of attraction among Chinese students in Thailand and Malaysia. *GMSARN International Journal*, 16, 66–74. <http://gmsarnjournal.com/home/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/vol16no1-7.pdf>
- Li, X., Haupt, J., & Lee, J. (2021). Student mobility choices in transnational education: Impact of macro-, meso- and micro-level factors. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 43(6), 639–653. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2020.1850332>
- Lin, Y., & Kingminghae, W. (2014). Social support and loneliness of Chinese international students in Thailand. *Journal of Population and Social Studies*, 22(2), 141–157. <https://doi.org/10.14456/jpss.2014.11>
- Liu, H. (2012). Transnational Chinese sphere in Singapore: Dynamics, transformations and characteristics. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 41(2), 37–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261204100203>
- Martin, F. (2018). Overseas study as a zone of suspension: Chinese students re-negotiating youth, gender, and intimacy. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 39(6), 688–703. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2018.1533538>
- Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G. N. (2002). “Push-pull” factors influencing international student destination choice. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 16(2), 82–90. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540210418403>
- Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China. (2026, April 11). 2025年我国留学回国人数达53.56万 [The number of Chinese students returning from overseas study reached 535,600 in 2025]. <https://jsj.moe.gov.cn>
- National Bureau of Statistics of China. (2021). *Statistics on graduate and students studying abroad* (China Statistical Yearbook 2021). <https://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/ndsj/2021/indexeh.htm>
- Neale, B. (2020). *Qualitative longitudinal research: Research methods*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Nomnian, S. (2018a). Chinese overseas students’ perspectives on benefits and limitations of English language learning and teaching between China and Thailand. *Arab World English Journal*, 9(2), 251–261. <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol9no2.17>
- Nomnian, S. (2018b). *Synergizing transcultural learning of global Englishes: Voices of Chinese exchange students in a Thai university*. Research Institution for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University.
- Ong, A., & Nonini, D. (Eds.). (1997). *Ungrounded empires: The cultural politics of modern Chinese transnationalism*. Routledge.
- Ray, D. (2006). Aspirations, poverty, and economic change. In A. V. Banerjee, R. Bénabou, & D. Mookherjee (Eds.), *Understanding poverty* (pp. 409–422). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195305191.003.0028>
- Santasombat, Y. (2022). Transnational Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia: An introduction. In Y. Santasombat (Ed.), *Transnational Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia: Case studies from Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore* (pp. 1–22). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-6406-0_1
- Siricharoen, N. (2023). Enhancing university education business: Motivations of Chinese students studying in Thailand. *Journal of ASEAN PLUS+ Studies*, 4(2), 51–69.
- Siriphon, A., & Li, J. (2023). In pursuit of children’s education abroad: China’s middle-class families and parental flexibility in transient migration to Thailand. *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, 19(1), 34–56. <https://doi.org/10.1163/17932548-12341478>
- UNESCO. (2026). *Higher education global trends report: Towards inclusive, equitable and quality higher education in an internationally mobile landscape*. UNESCO.



- Xiang, B., & Shen, W. (2009). International student migration and social stratification in China. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 29(5), 513–522. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2009.04.006>
- Ye, Y. (2020). Factors affecting the decision-making of the Chinese students to study in higher education institutions in Thailand. *Romphruek Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 38(1), 101–117. <https://so05.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/romphruekj/article/view/214045>