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Cultural and Academic Challenges of Foreign Students: A Documentation Towards Internationalization Policy Development

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Abstract

The internationalization of higher education has positioned the Philippines as a growing academic destination for foreign students. However, the cultural and academic challenges they encounter remain underexplored, particularly in the context of regional higher education institutions. This study comprehensively documented the experiences of foreign graduate students at Mariano Marcos State University (MMSU), focusing on cultural barriers, academic difficulties, and coping mechanisms. Guided by qualitative inquiry, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Chinese students to capture their lived realities of adaptation and integration. Findings revealed that cultural challenges included language barriers, social isolation, and limited intercultural interaction, which often hindered students' sense of belonging. Academic challenges were also evident in curriculum alignment, instructional delivery, and assessment practices that were not always responsive to international students' needs. Despite these difficulties, participants demonstrated resilience by employing coping strategies such as peer collaboration, improvisation of resources, and reliance on cultural practices to navigate their academic journey. The study highlights the importance of developing institutional policies and practices that are culturally responsive, supportive, and inclusive. It further underscores the need for improved faculty preparation, enhanced student services, and curriculum reforms aligned with global standards while remaining sensitive to local cultural contexts. By documenting these challenges and strategies, the study provides critical insights that can inform CHED and HEI internationalization policies, ensuring that Philippine universities move beyond policy rhetoric toward more inclusive and globally competitive educational practices.

Keywords: *Internationalization, foreign students, cultural challenges, academic challenges, higher education, coping mechanisms*

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Introduction

The internationalization of higher education has become a defining trend in the 21st century, reflecting the global movement of students, faculty, and knowledge across national boundaries. Universities worldwide are increasingly positioning themselves as global institutions by attracting international students who contribute to academic excellence, cultural diversity, and intercultural dialogue. In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has actively promoted internationalization initiatives since 2016, emphasizing student mobility, institutional partnerships, and academic collaborations. While such policies aim to align higher education institutions (HEIs) with global standards, the lived experiences of international students at the core of internationalization are often overlooked. This study addresses that gap by documenting international students' cultural and academic challenges in Philippine higher education institutions. It focuses on how their experiences can inform institutional support and internationalization policy development.

The Philippines has emerged as a destination for international students, particularly from Asia, Africa, and the Pacific, due to its English-medium instruction, relatively affordable education, and cultural openness. Mariano Marcos State University (MMSU) is one of the institutions actively participating in this trend through its graduate programs. However, while these efforts mark progress toward global competitiveness, international students often face significant cultural and academic challenges. These include language barriers, different instructional methods, limited cultural integration, and difficulties navigating new social and academic environments. Such obstacles may hinder their academic performance, social well-being, and overall educational experience, affecting the success of internationalization initiatives. Recognizing these challenges and identifying effective coping strategies is critical in ensuring that policies and practices foster inclusive, equitable, and sustainable internationalization in Philippine higher education.

Internationalization in higher education has been widely studied from multiple perspectives, particularly in student mobility, institutional readiness, and the lived experiences of international students. Andrade (2006) emphasized that international students often experience adjustment challenges in academics, especially when language barriers and differences in study habits limit their engagement with faculty and peers. Similarly, Sawir et al. (2008) noted that cultural isolation and difficulties in building meaningful social connections are among the most pressing issues confronting international students, further complicating their adjustment in host institutions. Marginson (2014) advanced this discourse by arguing that international

education must not be reduced to economic and academic exchanges; rather, it should be seen as a cultural and social process requiring inclusiveness and mutual respect.

Pedagogical approaches also play a vital role in shaping international students' experiences. Arkoudis and Tran (2010) underscored the need for culturally responsive teaching strategies that acknowledge diverse learning styles and foster classroom inclusion. In line with this, Ryan and Carroll (2005) highlighted how students' struggles extend beyond academics to cultural identity and social belonging, directly influencing their academic performance and overall well-being. Beelen and Jones (2015) introduced the "Internationalization at Home" concept, stressing that intercultural learning opportunities should not be confined to mobility programs but must also be embedded within local academic contexts to ensure broader inclusivity.

In the Philippine setting, Dimasindel and Salam (2018) assessed the readiness of public higher education institutions in the south. They reported that while structural and financial efforts toward internationalization were evident, significant gaps remained in addressing student-centered support services. Similarly, Diouquino (2018) employed Madeleine Green's framework on internationalization and concluded that although Philippine universities had integrated some practices, many still fell short of internationally recognized standards. Dotong and Laguador (2015) also highlighted the importance of aligning degree programs with global recognition systems, such as subject-specific rankings, to enhance credibility and attract more international students.

Globally, scholars have pointed to the cultural and academic realities that profoundly shape student adjustment. For instance, UNESCO (2019) stressed that cultural adaptation is key to international students' success and retention. Bodycott (2009) further explained how cultural values influence students' academic decision-making and coping strategies, suggesting that culture is inseparable from educational outcomes. Choudaha and de Wit (2014) extended this argument by asserting that internationalization should go beyond recruitment and instead focus on holistic student experiences, ensuring their academic, cultural, and social needs are addressed.

Research has also documented systemic barriers that international students face. Lee and Rice (2007) revealed experiences of discrimination and marginalization among international students in U.S. universities, underscoring the importance of addressing cultural sensitivity at institutional and policy levels. Complementing this, Glass et al. (2015) found that opportunities for intercultural engagement significantly enhance student satisfaction, academic success, and personal development. Similarly, Gu and Maley (2008) concluded that resilience and coping strategies, ranging from

peer networks to cultural adaptation, are vital for successful student adjustment. However, these must be matched with strong institutional support systems.

Taken together, these studies provide evidence that while internationalization is being actively promoted at both global and national levels, much of the discourse tends to focus on institutional frameworks, competitiveness, and policies rather than the everyday lived realities of students. Literature consistently points to the dual academic and cultural challenges that international students encounter while highlighting the role of pedagogy, institutional readiness, and intercultural opportunities in shaping their adjustment. Nevertheless, few studies in the Philippine context directly explore these realities from international students' perspectives, revealing a gap that this study intends to address.

These studies demonstrate that while internationalization is a global trend, its effectiveness depends on how institutions respond to international students' cultural and academic realities.

Although previous studies have examined institutional readiness, policy frameworks, and global competitiveness in Philippine higher education, there remains limited research on the lived experiences of international students in local academic settings. Most literature emphasizes structural and policy-level strategies, often neglecting the nuanced cultural and academic challenges students encounter in their day-to-day integration. Moreover, existing Philippine studies (e.g., Dimasindel & Salam, 2018; Diouquino, 2018) have primarily focused on institutional performance rather than student voices. It creates a gap in understanding how policies translate into practice and how cultural realities shape internationalization outcomes. By documenting the cultural and academic challenges international students face at MMSU, this study addresses this gap and contributes insights toward developing inclusive and culturally responsive internationalization policies.

Research Objectives

This study aimed to comprehensively document international students' cultural and academic challenges as part of their integration into higher education in the Philippines. It sought to examine their cultural barriers, particularly regarding adaptation, communication, social integration, and intercultural interactions within the host academic community. At the same time, it aimed to identify academic challenges such as language proficiency, instructional approaches, curriculum alignment, and assessment practices that shaped their overall learning experiences. In addition, the study endeavored to analyze the coping mechanisms and strategies employed by these students in navigating cultural and academic difficulties while

pursuing their studies, thereby providing insights that may inform institutional support and policy development toward internationalization.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to document and interpret the cultural and academic challenges encountered by international students at Mariano Marcos State University (MMSU). The phenomenological method was deemed appropriate because it enabled the researcher to capture and analyze participants' experiences concerning cultural adaptation, academic adjustments, and coping strategies within the university context.

The study participants were foreign graduate students from different programs at MMSU, including the Doctor of Education, Master of Arts in Education, and Master of Arts in Nursing. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had studied at the institution for at least one academic year to ensure that they had sufficient experience to share regarding both cultural and academic integration. Twelve international students were interviewed, representing diverse cultural backgrounds such as Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to narrate their experiences openly while allowing the researcher to probe for deeper insights. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and online, depending on the availability and preference of the participants. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were also held to supplement the interviews, which created a collaborative environment where international students could reflect on shared challenges and collective coping mechanisms. All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The study adopted thematic coding for data analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. The transcripts were carefully read, coded, and categorized into emerging themes that reflected the participants' cultural and academic challenges and coping strategies. Thematic clustering allowed the researcher to generate meaningful interpretations aligned with the study's objectives.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process. Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they were aware of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any point. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed by assigning pseudonyms to participants and securely storing the data. The study also adhered to the ethical guidelines set by MMSU's institutional

research office, ensuring respect for cultural sensitivities and fairness in representation.

Results and Findings of the Study

The findings of this study reveal that Chinese international students at Mariano Marcos State University encounter a complex interplay of cultural and academic challenges that shape their overall educational journey. Their experiences of cultural adaptation, language barriers, and academic adjustment underscore the realities of studying in a foreign country where norms, teaching methods, and social expectations differ significantly from those in China. At the same time, the resilience and coping mechanisms demonstrated by these students highlight their agency in navigating barriers through peer collaboration, self-directed learning, and integrating cultural practices into their academic life. These findings not only affirm the critical role of institutional support systems in easing international students' transitions but also emphasize the importance of culturally responsive policies that align with the goals of internationalization. By documenting their lived experiences, the study provides valuable insights that can inform higher education institutions in designing inclusive frameworks, enhancing intercultural understanding, and bridging the gap between policy rhetoric and practical support for international students.

Cultural Adaptation and Social Integration

Chinese students faced multifaceted cultural adjustment issues that extended beyond surface-level differences. One significant challenge was adapting to variations in food preferences, as many students found Filipino cuisine markedly different from the dietary habits and flavors they were accustomed to in China. Religious practices also became an area of adjustment, since the Philippines is predominantly Catholic, and cultural events, academic schedules, and even campus traditions were often tied to Christian observances. Classroom etiquette presented another layer of difficulty, as Chinese students were more familiar with teacher-centered instruction and a hierarchical classroom environment. At the same time, Filipino higher education often encouraged interactive discussions, collaborative group work, and active student participation. This difference required them to reorient their learning behaviors and communication styles.

Social interaction norms further complicated their adjustment. Chinese students noted that Filipino peers and faculty were generally warm, hospitable, and expressive in communication, whereas they came from a cultural background that valued modesty, indirectness, and restraint. This contrast sometimes led to

misunderstandings, feelings of social isolation, or hesitation in forming close relationships with local students. Their adaptation process, therefore, was not confined to daily living adjustments but also entailed integrating into an academic community where expectations of participation, collaboration, and intercultural dialogue were strongly emphasized. Successfully navigating these challenges demanded resilience and the development of intercultural competence, as their success in the host institution depended on academic performance and their ability to align with the cultural dynamics of the Filipino educational context.

Responses from Foreign students

"It was difficult for me to join group discussions at first. Filipino classmates are very friendly, but I was shy because I did not understand some jokes and cultural expressions."

"Food was a challenge because what I eat is very different, so I often cook by myself. Nevertheless, sometimes Filipino classmates invite me, and I try their dishes."

These experiences resonate with the findings of Zhang and Zhou (2019), who emphasized that cultural adaptation is one of the primary barriers faced by Chinese students abroad, often leading to initial isolation. Berry's (2005) acculturation theory also explains that adjustment involves maintaining one's cultural identity and adapting to the host culture. In the Philippine context, Gonzalez (2020) noted that international students enrich intercultural understanding but often need structured programs to help them integrate socially.

Language and Academic Communication

Language barriers were a consistent challenge, particularly in English-medium instruction. While most Chinese students had prior English exposure, they found academic discussions, technical vocabulary, and oral recitations challenging. Misinterpretations during lectures or exams sometimes hinder their academic performance.

Responses from Foreign students

"I can read books and articles, but speaking in class is hard. Sometimes I am afraid to make mistakes, so I keep quiet."

"Exams are difficult because the questions are long. I need more time to translate them in my mind."

It reflects Andrade's (2006) findings that international students often struggle more with oral fluency than reading comprehension, impacting classroom participation. Similarly, Wang & Shan (2007) argued that for Chinese students, silence in class is not disinterest but often a coping mechanism against linguistic insecurity. In

the Philippine setting, Bernardo (2017) highlighted the need for inclusive pedagogy considering varying English proficiency levels among foreign learners.

Academic Adjustment and Instructional Practices

Chinese students observed differences in teaching styles. While Chinese classrooms are often lecture-driven and exam-focused, Filipino pedagogy emphasizes class participation, collaborative projects, and reflective assessments. This mismatch created initial difficulties in aligning their study habits with faculty expectations.

Responses from Foreign students

"In China, we just listen to lectures and memorize. Teachers ask for opinions and projects here, which is very new for me."

"Sometimes I do not understand why participation is graded. It feels stressful to talk in class."

These experiences are consistent with Li (2012), who pointed out that Chinese students abroad often encounter pedagogical cultures prioritizing critical thinking and active participation rather than rote memorization. Marginson (2014) further explained that academic culture shock often influences self-confidence and performance. Locally, Guillermo (2019) observed that international students in Philippine universities face challenges adapting to participatory teaching methods that differ significantly from their home systems.

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

Despite cultural and academic barriers, Chinese students demonstrated resilience by creating support networks, practicing self-study strategies, and seeking peer or faculty assistance. Some relied on other Chinese peers for mutual support, while others actively engaged with Filipino classmates to improve their communication and integration.

Responses from Foreign students

"I study for more hours myself and ask my classmates for help with English words."

"Joining Filipino friends helped me to learn faster. They are patient when I speak slowly."

These coping strategies are echoed in Yeh and Inose (2003), who found that social support systems are critical for international students' adjustment. Similarly, Sawir et al. (2008) highlighted that friendship networks with host-country peers significantly reduce loneliness and cultural stress. In the Philippine context, Almonte-Acosta (2010) emphasized that international students' resilience is strengthened when institutions provide mentoring and counseling services tailored to cultural needs.

Implications for Internationalization Policy

The lived experiences of Chinese students underscore the need for policies that go beyond the recruitment of international students and focus on holistic support mechanisms. It includes culturally responsive orientation programs, language support services, and faculty training on inclusive pedagogy.

Responses from Foreign students

"If the school can give language support or training at the start, it will help us a lot."
(FS2)

"Orientation about Filipino culture would make me more confident." (FS7)

It aligns with UNESCO (2015), which calls for internationalization to be academic and cultural, ensuring inclusivity and sustainability. Knight (2012) argued that internationalization must be student-centered, embedding support services in the policy framework. Within the Philippine setting, CHED (2016) has emphasized internationalization, but Diouquino (2018) noted that there remains a gap between policy frameworks and student-level support.

Discussion

Chinese students reported that adapting to Filipino cultural norms was enriching and challenging. Many expressed initial struggles in understanding classroom dynamics, where teachers encouraged open discussions and collaborative work, approaches that were less emphasized in their home context. For instance, one student noted, *"At first, I felt shy to speak in class discussions because in China, we listen more than we talk."* This reflects Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimension theory, which explains how high-power distance cultures may discourage open exchanges with authority figures, unlike the more participatory learning culture in the Philippines. The interpretation suggests that while students eventually adjusted, cultural orientation programs and intercultural dialogue activities remain essential for easing transitions.

Language was a recurring theme in students' responses, particularly regarding technical academic vocabulary and informal classroom interactions. A participant explained, *"I understand the lectures, but sometimes, I find it hard to express my answers correctly in English."* Such responses align with findings by Sawir (2005), who noted that language difficulties are a primary academic challenge for international students, often leading to lower confidence and class participation. The interpretation underscores that proficiency is about comprehension and the ability to engage fully in

academic discourse. It highlights the need for sustained English language support and peer mentoring programs.

Students highlighted differences between Chinese and Philippine pedagogical methods, observing that Mariano Marcos State University lessons emphasized practical application and group activities. One student remarked, *“Here, teachers give projects and fieldwork; in China, we study more theory.”* This perception resonates with Kolb’s (2014) experiential learning theory, which emphasizes learning through active participation and reflection. The interpretation suggests that while this shift initially posed difficulties, it also enhanced students’ problem-solving and adaptability skills, reinforcing the strengths of Philippine higher education pedagogy.

Despite challenges, Chinese students demonstrated resilience through improvisation, peer collaboration, and cultural adaptation. A student shared, *“When I do not understand, I ask my Filipino classmates, and they explain patiently.”* It reflects Berry’s (1997) acculturation framework, where students engaged in integration strategies by combining their cultural identity with active participation in the host environment. These coping mechanisms reveal not only individual perseverance but also the supportive role of local peers in creating an inclusive academic environment.

While the students acknowledged supportive faculty and peers, they also pointed out gaps in institutional services, such as limited orientation programs tailored for international students and inadequate academic advising. These responses affirm earlier studies (e.g., Montgomery, 2010; Arkoudis & Baik, 2014) emphasize the importance of structured institutional support in internationalization. The interpretation suggests that universities must go beyond recruitment and prioritize sustained cultural, academic, and emotional support systems if internationalization policies are to be meaningful and sustainable.

Conclusion

This study concludes that integrating international students into higher education in the Philippines, particularly at Mariano Marcos State University, is shaped by intertwined cultural and academic challenges that require thoughtful institutional responses. On the cultural side, international students, particularly Chinese learners, faced significant adjustment issues such as language barriers, difficulties in social integration, and navigating intercultural interactions. These challenges often affected their sense of belonging, creating experiences of isolation that echoed earlier studies highlighting the importance of social support and cultural sensitivity in international education (Berry, 2005; Sawir et al., 2008). Nevertheless, many students demonstrated resilience by drawing on coping strategies such as peer

collaboration, reliance on co-national networks, and incorporating cultural practices into their academic lives.

Academically, students encountered difficulties in instructional approaches, curriculum alignment, and assessment methods, especially where language proficiency was a limiting factor. Despite these obstacles, their experiences reaffirmed the importance of aligning pedagogy with the needs of international learners and ensuring that curricula are inclusive and adaptable. This finding supports UNESCO's (2019) call for culturally and linguistically responsive education in internationalized institutions.

Overall, the findings emphasize that international students are not passive recipients of education but active participants who bring with them cultural assets, adaptability, and diverse perspectives. For MMSU and other Philippine higher education institutions, this means that internationalization should not only focus on policy frameworks or global rankings but also prioritize culturally responsive support services, teacher preparation, and inclusive curriculum design. By addressing structural gaps while valuing cultural diversity, universities can transform the challenges of international students into opportunities for enriching academic communities, advancing global competitiveness, and fostering sustainable, inclusive internationalization.

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