

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Studying in Shanghai and its impacts on Thai International Students' Opinions towards the Chinese People and China

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received December 22, 2022


Accepted June 21, 2023

Published Online July 3, 2023

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How to cite: Lin, Y., & Kingminghae, W. (2023). Studying in Shanghai and its impacts on Thai International Students' Opinions towards the Chinese People and China. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 12(3): 103-125.



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ABSTRACT

Background/purpose – The extent and mechanisms through which studying abroad influences international students' opinions towards the host country and its people remain a relatively understudied area. Drawing upon intergroup contact theory and Bourdieu's concept of "habitus," this study aims to fill this gap by examining the impact of studying in Shanghai on the opinions of Thai tertiary-level students towards China and the Chinese people.

Materials/methods – This study employed a counterfactual method to assess the influence of studying in China on the attitude change of Thai students. To evaluate this impact, two pre-pandemic samples were collected, one from Thailand and the other from China.

Results – The double-robust IPWRA estimator used in the study found that direct experience with the Chinese people and China's development in Shanghai significantly improved the Thai students' attitudes towards China and the Chinese people by around 20%. Moreover, individuals whose fathers were involved in business or regularly navigate market risks and opportunities exhibited a higher sensitivity to changes in their opinions towards China. However, individuals whose fathers possess cultural capital and had stable employment demonstrated a heightened sensitivity to changes in their attitudes towards the Chinese people.

Conclusion – Both intergroup contact conditions and students' social origins were key factors that influenced nuanced attitude changes of international students towards their host country and its people.

Keywords – international student, intergroup contact, public diplomacy, overseas experience, attitude change.

To link to this article– <https://dx.doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2023.123.5>

1. INTRODUCTION

The number of international students worldwide has seen a significant increase in recent decades, with the number rising from 2 million in 1988 to 5.6 million in 2018, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). The presence of international students brings numerous benefits to host countries, including the payment of tuition fees, increased diversity on campus, and enhanced national competitiveness (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Han et al., 2022; Jöns & Hoyler, 2013).

An influx of international students also provides opportunities for individuals to interact and form cross-cultural bonds. In the field of international relations, concepts such as soft power and public diplomacy have gained more attention in the post-Cold War era (Gilboa, 2008). According to Nye (2004), soft power is derived from the attractiveness of a country's values, culture, and policies, while public diplomacy involves the use of soft power. One key measure of a country's soft power is the public's perception of the country, which can be predominantly positive or negative (Chu et al., 2015). Attracting international students is seen as an effective way to improve positive opinions of a country and is a commonly employed strategy (Atkinson, 2010; Kim, 2016; Li & Xue, 2022; Lomer, 2017).

In recent decades, China's economic and military might has grown significantly. During this time, the number of international students in China has also increased, going from less than 2,000 in 1978 to 492,185 in 2018, with South Korea, Thailand, and Pakistan being the top source countries (Ministry of Education PRC, 2018; Zhu & Lou, 2011). Despite the Chinese government's efforts to enhance China's soft power through the recruitment of international students (Paradise, 2012; Yousaf et al., 2020), the favorable perceptions of China have been on the decline among individuals from Western countries as well as China's neighboring nations (Lee & Hao, 2018; Silver et al., 2019). Given that these neighboring nations are major sources of international students in China, the impact of studying abroad on enhancing positive opinions of the host country seems worthy of being explored. As a matter of fact, in recent times, certain governments have implemented more stringent regulations for international students, with a particular focus on those from China (Altbach, 2019). This trend reflects a growing skepticism not only towards the students themselves but also towards the transformative potential of international education.

Drawing upon Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport et al., 1954/1979; Pettigrew, 1998) and French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1977), the current study aims to investigate whether overseas study experiences can contribute to a positive shift in international students' perceptions of the host country as well as its people. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the underlying mechanisms through which this change occurs. In this study, we specifically focus on Shanghai as a setting where favorable conditions for intergroup contact are present for Thai students. We quantitatively investigate the extent to which the experiences of Thai students in Shanghai contribute to improvements in their perceptions of China and the Chinese people. To accomplish this, we employ a counterfactual analysis that involves two separate samples of Thai tertiary-level students, one collected in Thailand and the other in Shanghai, China, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, this study delves into the varying degrees of opinion improvement among Thai students with different social origins, as well as the specific aspects of their opinions that undergo transformation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In addition to or despite claiming educational purposes as their motivation, international students may in fact be motivated by a range of factors. In a broad sense, they can be considered immigrants. Immigrants typically need a period of adaptation and adjustment to their new environment (Berry et al., 1997; Zhou et al., 2008). Some of these changes are observable or behavioral in nature, such as learning culturally specific social skills or the codes necessary to interact with the local population. At the cognitive level, significant changes can also be observed, as notions or ideas that were once considered unacceptable gradually gain acceptance over time (Brown et al., 2010; Kwon & Hughes, 2018).

Immigrants may also gradually change their overall attitudes towards their host country and its people. Countries are complex attitude objects that can be evaluated based on various aspects such as culture, history, landscapes, and diplomacy. Among these, attitudes towards the host people are a particularly integral element in overall attitudes towards the country (Davis, 1971; Yun, 2014). There are several factors that can influence the attitudes of international students towards their host country and its people. These factors can be at the country level, such as cultural distance (Galchenko & Van De Vijver, 2007; Yousaf et al., 2020) and strategic relationships (Aldrich et al., 2015; Lee & Hao, 2018; Lukin, 1999). Students' pre-arrival predispositions, such as nationalism and ethnocentrism, may also be important (Han et al., 2013). Additionally, research has suggested that deep and extensive social interactions with locals are necessary contextual conditions for educational exchange programs to translate into soft power (Atkinson, 2010; Bislev, 2017). In fact, social contact with host country nationals has long been identified as a key factor influencing international students' attitudes (Selltitz & Cook, 1962). These findings align with the principles of Intergroup Contact Theory.

According to the Contact Hypothesis of Intergroup Contact Theory, intergroup contact can improve attitudes towards outgroups under certain "optimal" conditions, such as equal status, cooperation towards common goals, and supervision by relevant authorities (Allport et al., 1954/1979). However, it is important to note that the conditions of intergroup contact that many international students experience are often far from ideal or optimal. To begin with, international student mobility is largely concentrated in a south-to-north pattern (Hosgorur & Aysel, 2022; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). Differences in race and socioeconomic development between countries can lead to prejudice and discrimination against immigrants from underdeveloped countries (Abebe et al., 2014). Many international students from East Asia face discrimination in Western or Oceanian host countries (Collins, 2010; Guo & Guo, 2017; Quinton, 2019). Moreover, Pettigrew (1998) argued that "friendship potential" is another essential condition for positive intergroup contact effects that generalize to the whole group. However, international students may often have difficulty interacting with or befriending locals (Fincher & Shaw, 2009; Güvendir, 2017; Meier & Daniels, 2013). As a result, frustrating experiences of many international students may not improve their attitudes towards the host country and its people.

In the current study, Shanghai is considered to provide relatively favorable conditions for intergroup contact among international students. As a city with a long history of being an international trade hub (Lu, 1999), Shanghai locals tend to treat foreigners equally and respectfully (Wu, 2004). Since the initiation of the reform and opening-up era in the 1980s, Shanghai has emerged as a magnet for a significant number of expatriates (Farrer, 2010) and remains the top-ranked destination city for international overnight visitors on the Chinese

mainland (Hedrick-Wong & Choong, 2016). Thai students may find particularly favorable intergroup contact conditions in Shanghai for several additional reasons. First, there is no significant economic gap or cultural distance between Thailand and China, both of which are middle-income Asian countries (Bao, 2004; Hewison, 2018). Second, Thailand has a long-standing policy of maintaining good relations with all major powers (Busbarat, 2016). Third, Shanghai also has a special rapport with Thailand, as evidenced by the presence of the Shanghai branch of Bangkok Bank in the iconic Bund (the historical CBD of Shanghai) and the Royal Thai Consulate-General in Shanghai, which helps to protect the rights and interests of Thais, creating a supervised or “sanctioned” (Allport et al., 1954/1979) environment that facilitates intergroup attitude improvement. Therefore, we contend that although unfavorable conditions often hinder the improvement of international students’ opinions towards the host people, this is not the case for Thai international students in Shanghai, China.

Hypothesis 1: Experiences of Thai international students in Shanghai improve their opinions of the Chinese people.

Given that attitudes towards the host people significantly influence overall attitudes towards the country (Davis, 1971; Yun, 2014), it is highly plausible that the attitudes of Thai international students towards China will also experience improvement. Moreover, upon their arrival, students have the unique opportunity to witness the firsthand development of China, rather than relying solely on media portrayals in their home country. In Shanghai, China, Thai students gain access to a plethora of Chinese products that are not readily available in their home country. This includes a wide range of infrastructure developments, high-end products, and the convenience of ubiquitous mobile payment systems. Furthermore, Thai students in Shanghai may have opportunities to interact with Chinese government officials or members of the Communist Party of China. This interaction can potentially dismantle negative stereotypes and lead to a newfound appreciation for the productivity and efficiency demonstrated by China’s governance and economic model. In summary, being physically present in a developed region of China provides Thai students with a comprehensive understanding and a greater appreciation of the remarkable progress achieved by the country.

Hypothesis 2: Experiences of Thai international students in Shanghai improve their opinions of China.

The anticipated positive effect of studying in Shanghai is expected to vary among students, rather than being uniform for all. Previous research has identified a range of personal factors that may influence or moderate the impact of studying abroad, including gender, personality, subjective values, and predispositions (Han et al., 2013; Yamazaki et al., 2000). To gain deeper insights into the variations in attitude change among students, we incorporate Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus. This concept refers to the cognitive structures through which individuals understand and evaluate the social world, which are greatly influenced by their parents’ social position or class (Bourdieu, 1977). Based on this framework, we propose that students’ social origin may moderate the effects of their overseas experiences on their opinions towards the host country and its people. By integrating Intergroup Contact Theory and Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, the following hypotheses are formulated.

During the exploration of optimal contact conditions for enhancing attitudes towards outgroups, scholars have highlighted the effectiveness of contacts that facilitate

personalization of outgroup members and the development of intimacy with them (Miller, 2002; Tredoux & Finchilescu, 2007). This prompts the question of which types of families are more likely to raise children who can readily personalize outgroup members. Bourdieu (1977) argued that people in managerial or professional positions typically have cultural capital, which they pass on to their children and shape their habitus. Consequently, children raised in families with cultural capital possess not only a diverse knowledge base that facilitates intercultural communication but also a habitus that empowers them to personalize outgroups instead of relying on stereotypes. Solhaug and Kristensen (2020) found that coming from a home with cultural capital has moderate importance for secondary school students' intercultural empathy, awareness, and knowledge. The effect of cultural capital or habitus may be even more significant for tertiary-level international students.

Hypothesis 3: Students whose fathers hold managerial or professional positions experience more positive attitude changes towards the Chinese people if they study in Shanghai.

Studies indicate that numerous Thai families with business-oriented backgrounds opt to send their children to study in China, driven by the desire to enhance their business interests (Kingminghae & Lin, 2019; Marcu, 2015). After all, the greater Shanghai region is a major contributor to the global economy. The CP Group, one of Thailand's largest conglomerates, had more than 10 investments in Shanghai at the time when this study was conducted (CP Group, 2020).

Based on the habitus concept, we postulate that individuals from business-oriented families are more inclined to be aware of and attuned to the economic prosperity and business opportunities they witness in Shanghai. This heightened awareness can be attributed to their upbringing, which has influenced their cognitive structure and shaped their perception of such aspects. Consequently, the adage "seeing is believing" holds true, as individuals from business-oriented families are likely to witness and comprehend a greater number of economically-oriented aspects in Shanghai. As a result, their opinions about China would be notably enhanced, given their increased exposure and clearer understanding of the economic nature of various elements within the city.

Hypothesis 4: Students whose fathers are businessmen experience more positive attitude changes towards China if they study in Shanghai.

The conceptual framework that underpins the current research can be succinctly summarized as depicted in Figure 1.

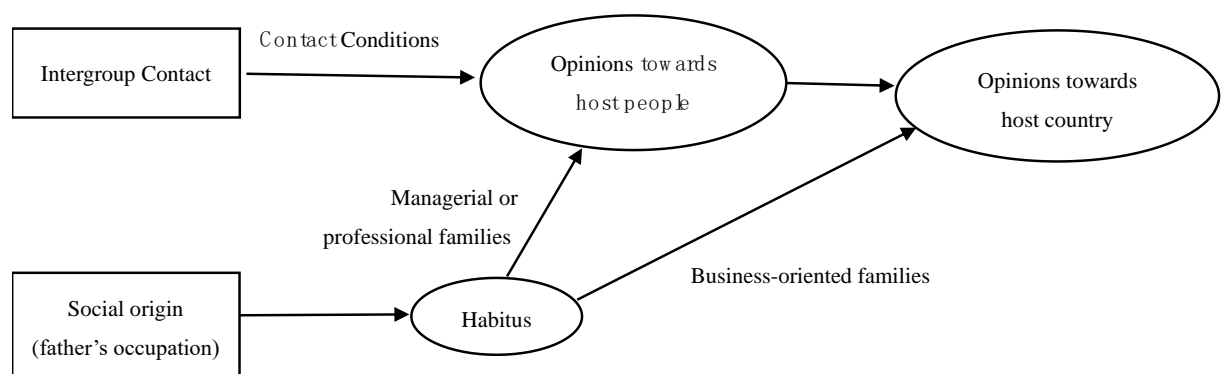


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

Most previous quantitative studies on the effects of overseas experience have used a single sample of either current international students or returnees. However, this research design has a limitation in that (former) international students often choose a destination country because they already have a positive attitude towards it. Therefore, finding positive attitudes among these students may simply be the result of self-selection. In order to examine the influence of overseas experience and investigate the potential moderating effect of students' social origin (specifically, their father's occupation), a counterfactual framework was employed. The study encompasses two samples, with the sample collected in Thailand comprising 496 participants and the sample collected in China consisting of 304 participants. Detailed information about the participants will be presented later in the Procedures subsection.

3.2. Instruments

There are two dependent variables in this study: opinions towards the Chinese people in mainland China and opinions towards China as a country. To measure opinions towards the Chinese people, we used an instrument based on the 2012 U.S.-China Security Perceptions Project conducted by the Pew Research Center (2012). Respondents were asked whether they associate the following characteristics with the people of China: hardworking, competitive, inventive, nationalistic, modern, sophisticated, honest, aggressive, greedy, tolerant, arrogant, selfish, generous, rude, and violent. In order to refine the instrument for measuring opinions towards the Chinese people, we made some modifications based on feedback from a pilot survey conducted in May 2016. Specifically, we deleted the items "sophisticated" and "aggressive," and replaced "nationalistic" with the more general term "love their country." We also added a new item, "unhygienic habits," as this characteristic was frequently mentioned by respondents in the pilot survey.

The overall attitudes towards mainland Chinese were calculated by summing the "yes" responses for the following characteristics: hardworking, tolerant, patriotic, modern, honest, inventive, competitive, and generous, as well as the "no" responses for violent, arrogant, greedy, selfish, rude, and unhygienic. The internal consistency of these 14 items was assessed using Kuder-Richarson's coefficient, which was found to be .68 in the sample, indicating an acceptable level of consistency (Mohamad et al., 2015).

To assess attitudes towards China, we adopted the standard instrument used by the Pew Research Center (2014), which asks respondents to indicate whether they have a "very favorable," "somewhat favorable," "somewhat unfavorable," or "very unfavorable" opinion of China. In accordance with the practice of the Pew Research Center, responses of "very favorable" and "somewhat favorable" were combined to form a category of "favorable opinions," while responses of "somewhat unfavorable" and "very unfavorable" were combined to form a category of "unfavorable opinions" (Wike, 2017).

A key independent variable in this study is the occupation of the international students' fathers, which serves as a proxy for the students' social origin. There were four occupation categories: family-run small and medium enterprises (SMEs), manager/professional, non-manual workers (such as general staff or skilled workers), and (semi-) manual workers and farmers. Family-run SMEs are prevalent in the Thai economy (Chittithaworn et al., 2011), and we included them as a separate category in order to capture this important aspect of the Thai

labor market. In addition, those in the last group (manual workers and farmers) are more likely to be from rural areas of Thailand, as compared to the other groups.

We also included demographic variables of gender, age, and ethnicity in our models. Since the ages of the study participants were largely confined to a narrow range, we did not include a quadratic term for age in the models in the interest of parsimony, particularly when educational levels (undergraduate and graduate) were already included in the models. Regarding ethnicity, many Thais are ethnic Chinese (Bao, 2004; Skinner, 1957). Given Thailand's naturalization policy towards Chinese immigrants in the 20th century, many Thai citizens of Chinese descent have lost their ability to speak Chinese and their social ties to China over time (Skinner, 1957; Tong, 2010). To control for respondents' connections to China, rather than asking about their ethnicity directly, we inquired about their Chinese language skills (including dialects), as well as those of their parents and grandparents.

Research has indicated that individuals' knowledge of a foreign country can impact their attitudes towards that country (Aldrich et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2013). To account for the potential influence of knowledge about Chinese affairs, it is essential to include it as a control variable. Given Thailand's high level of globalization, Thai individuals have easy access to information about foreign countries through various media outlets and direct communication with people from these countries. In recent years, China has actively promoted its "Belt and Road" initiative (Huang, 2016), which has received significant coverage in the Thai media and has been widely discussed by both academics and in the arena of the general public (Punyaratabandhu & Swaspitchayaskun, 2018). Therefore, in the current study, we used knowledge about the Belt and Road initiative as a proxy for overall knowledge of Chinese affairs. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the samples.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Samples

		Thailand (n=496)	Shanghai (n=304)
Dependent variables			
attitude towards the (mainland) Chinese		5.35 2.58 (SD)	6.06 2.37 (SD)
favorable attitude towards P.R. China		68.55%	93.09%
Independent variables			
Gender			
	male	22.83%	25.33%
	female	77.17%	74.67%
Age		21.8 4.61 (SD)	22.79 3.3 (SD)
Program level			
	undergraduate	87.30%	87.04%
	graduate	12.70%	12.96%
Parents' Chinese language skills			
	little to none	73.17%	64.47%
	intermediate	19.92%	24.67%
	advanced	6.92%	10.86%
Grandparents' Chinese language skills			
	little to none	61.75%	52.96%
	intermediate	15.18%	23.36%
	advanced	23.08%	23.68%
Father's occupation			
	business owner	37.11%	52.47%
	managerial/professional	26.67%	23.57%
	non-manual worker (general staff or skilled worker)	23.78%	16.35%
	manual worker or farmer	12.44%	7.60%
Parents' monthly income (unit: 10,000 bhat)		6.08 4.72 (SD)	8.59 4.96 (SD)
Knowledge about China's "Belt and Road" initiative			
	little to none	75.71%	43.09%
	some	16.40%	22.04%
	quite some	7.89%	34.87%

note: sample sizes used in the subsequent analyses are smaller due to missing data.

3.3. Procedures

In 2016, the authors conducted a survey to examine the perspectives of Thai tertiary-level students regarding China. The survey commenced in May of that year with a pilot survey aimed at designing and refining the questionnaire. In October, the final version of the questionnaire was administered to the participants. The sample was formed using purposive sampling, with the criteria being the region, ranking, and type (comprehensive or specialized) of the educational institutions. The final sample included students from nine educational institutions (including universities and research institutes with graduate students) in three regions of Thailand: six in the central Great Bangkok Metropolitan region, one in the north, and one in the south. We administered the questionnaire in the classrooms of cooperating

professors and obtained a sample of 496 students with a high response rate of around 80%. The questionnaire included items on the students' demographic characteristics and their parents' socioeconomic status, as well as their attitudes towards China and the Chinese people using questions designed by the PEW Research Center (as shown later in this paper).

In April 2017, the authors conducted a study on Thai international students' cross-cultural experiences in Shanghai, China. To begin the study, we established contact with the Royal Thai Consulate and obtained information regarding the distribution of Thai students across universities in Shanghai. During that month, the Thai community celebrated the Songkram festival, which marks the Thai New Year. The authors had the opportunity to attend the celebration organized by the Royal Thai Consulate in Shanghai, which saw the participation of numerous Thai international students. Based on the information provided by the Royal Thai Consulate, we reached out to students from nine universities in Shanghai that had the highest number of Thai students. We approached them to gather additional information. In May and June, we distributed the same questionnaire used in the Thailand study to all the Thai students available at these universities. The process was facilitated with the assistance of the informant students we had met during the Songkram festival event. We obtained a total of 304 completed questionnaires, with a response rate of around 70% according to the informant students.

3.4. Data Analysis

Although the two surveys were not conducted simultaneously, we assume that there were no major events in China or Thailand during the half-year time lag that would significantly affect the attitudes of Thai students. Therefore, we can treat the data as cross-sectional.

As previously mentioned, it is possible that students in Shanghai had more positive attitudes towards China even before they were in Thailand. The observed differences in attitudes between these two groups could also be due to both the varying values of the predictor variables and their differing effects on the dependent variable under different regimes, or states, in this case Thailand and Shanghai.

It is worth noting that the decision to stay in Thailand or go abroad was made only once, and we cannot observe what a student's attitudes would be if they had chosen differently. Therefore, the causality in this study is approximate in nature. One way to address this issue is by calculating the difference in potential outcomes between the two regimes using matching methods such as "Nearest Neighbor" or those based on propensity scores (Guo & Fraser, 2014). However, because the respondents in our study were clustered in educational institutions, such methods cannot provide consistent standard errors (StataCorp, 2015). As a result, we rely on regression adjustment in the two regimes to estimate the potential outcomes.

Additionally, Wooldridge (2007) suggested that self-selection should also be taken into account in order to obtain more reliable estimates of treatment effects. To address this issue, we adopted the Inverse-probability-weighted regression-adjustment (IPWRA) method in this study (Wooldridge, 2007, 2010). This method involves first estimating a treatment model and calculating inverse-probability weights accordingly. Weighted regression models of the outcome for each treatment level are then used to estimate two potential outcomes for each subject. The average difference between these two potential outcomes estimates the average treatment effect (ATE). The IPWRA method is "double robust," meaning that as long as either the outcome model or the treatment model is correctly specified, the estimation of treatment effects will be consistent (StataCorp, 2015; Wooldridge, 2007).

4. RESULTS

Before presenting the results of our IPWRA models in Table 3, we first report the results of models that do not take into account self-selection into regimes in Table 2. This allows us to identify potential biases in these preliminary models. In Model 1, Shanghai is included as an independent variable. Since the scores for “attitudes towards the Chinese” are non-negative integers, we utilized negative binomial regression for this analysis. The coefficient for Shanghai in Model 1 indicates that, holding all other variables constant, the mean score for those in Shanghai is 1.1 times that of those in Thailand. The estimated difference in marginal means, which is equivalent to the ATE in the counterfactual framework, is estimated to be 0.6.

Table 2. Estimated Treatment Effects without weighing (N=661)

Variables	Attitude towards the (mainland) Chinese			Favorable Attitude towards P. R. China		
	Model 1 Negative Binomial	Model 2 regression adjustment for treatment effect		Model 3 Logistic	Model 4 regression adjustment for treatment effect	
		Thailand	Shanghai		Thailand	Shanghai
Male	0.08 (0.06)	0.15** (0.06)	-0.04 (0.07)	0.08 (0.17)	0.07 (0.17)	0.04 (0.46)
Age	-0.01** (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.22*** (0.07)
Graduate level (undergraduate as the reference category)	0.05 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.11)	0.08 (0.06)	0.56 (0.53)	0.43 (0.59)	0.68 (0.52)
Parents' Chinese language skills ("little to none" as the reference category)						
intermediate level	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.07 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.54** (0.26)	-0.74*** (0.26)	3.16*** (1.07)
advanced level	0.03 (0.07)	0.15*** (0.04)	-0.12 (0.10)	-0.68 (0.51)	-0.44 (0.66)	-0.65 (0.49)
Grandparents' Chinese language skills ("little to none" as the reference category)						
intermediate level	0.09*** (0.03)	0.03 (0.05)	0.11*** (0.04)	0.43 (0.28)	0.50* (0.28)	-0.58 (0.38)
advanced level	0.05 (0.04)	0.10** (0.05)	0.01 (0.04)	0.63** (0.31)	0.73** (0.34)	0.31 (0.61)
Father's occupation (running business as the reference category)						
managerial or professional	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.06)	0.08*** (0.03)	-0.14 (0.30)	0.21 (0.24)	-2.42*** (0.93)
non-manual (general staff or skilled worker)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.10* (0.06)	0.02 (0.05)	0.34 (0.26)	0.57*** (0.22)	-1.71 (1.30)
farmer or manual worker	0.00 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)	0.02 (0.09)	0.56 (0.38)	0.66* (0.39)	4.95*** (1.25)
Knowledge about "Belt and Road" Initiative ("quite some" as the reference category)						
some	0.05 (0.05)	-0.11 (0.07)	0.13** (0.06)	-0.92* (0.48)	-0.73 (0.60)	-2.21** (0.92)
little to none	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.24*** (0.08)	0.09** (0.04)	-1.10*** (0.40)	-0.80* (0.45)	-2.81*** (0.66)
Shanghai (as a variable)	0.11*** (0.04)			1.86*** (0.44)		
Constant	1.93*** (0.12)	2.01*** (0.14)	1.94*** (0.17)	2.62** (1.13)	1.80 (1.21)	11.09*** (2.24)
Effect estimation						
ATE	0.60*** (0.2)	0.68*** (0.26)		0.21** (0.05)	0.20** (0.05)	
POM (Thailand)	5.4*** (0.2)	5.54*** (0.22)		0.73*** (0.04)	0.72*** (0.04)	

Note: ATEs were estimated by marginal means when Shanghai was treated as a variable;
standard errors adjusted for clusters in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1;

In contrast to the shared coefficients for the two locations/regimes in Model 1, Model 2 allows for different effects of the same independent variables. The results show that the

estimated Potential Outcome Mean (POM) of attitudes towards the Chinese people in the Thailand regime is 5.54, and the estimated average treatment effect (ATE) of studying in Shanghai is 0.68, which is higher than the estimate obtained in Model 1.

Model 3 and Model 4 examine attitudes towards China as a country. Model 3 presents the results of a logistic regression analysis (favorable vs. unfavorable) and shows a significant coefficient of 1.68 for Shanghai as an independent variable. In terms of marginal effects, the predicted probability of having a favorable view of China in the Thailand regime is 73%, which is 21% lower than in the Shanghai regime. Model 4, which utilizes regression adjustment (RA) to estimate potential outcomes, estimates that the POM of having a favorable view of China in the Thailand regime is 72%, and the ATE of studying in Shanghai is approximately 20%, which is similar to the estimate obtained in Model 3.

While the regression adjustment (RA) approach for estimating average treatment effects (ATEs) allows for separate regressions in the two regimes, it does not take into account self-selection into the regimes. Table 3 presents more reliable estimations of ATEs using the inverse probability weighting regression adjustment (IPWRA) method. This method first estimates the probability of each subject going to Shanghai (the selection or treatment model) and then uses this information to estimate weighted regressions in the two regimes.

As shown in Table 3, parents' income is included only in the treatment model. It is common for Thais to view studying abroad as a "family affair" (Pimpa, 2005), and therefore, parents' income can be a significant factor. We suspect that there may be only moderate variation in parents' income among those already studying in Shanghai, as wealthier families may have chosen to send their children to study in more developed countries. As the father's occupation is already included in the outcome models, we do not include parents' income there for parsimony. "Knowledge of Chinese affairs" (as proxied by knowledge of the Belt and Road initiative) is included only in the outcome models but is not used to predict treatment status, as students in Shanghai are more likely to be exposed to this knowledge after arriving in the city.

Table 3. Estimated Treatment Effects with Weighing (IPWRA) (N=548)

Variables	Treatment Model (same for Model 5 and Model6)	Attitude towards the (mainland) Chinese		Favorable Attitude towards P. R. China	
		Model 5 (IPWRA on non- negative outcomes)		Model 6 (IPWRA on binary outcomes)	
		Thailand	Shanghai	Thailand	Shanghai
Male	-0.04 (0.32)	0.17*** (0.07)	-0.01 (0.09)	0.25 (0.21)	1.42* (0.82)
Age	0.06 (0.06)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.23* (0.12)
Graduate Level (undergraduate as the reference category)	-0.74 (0.65)	-0.09 (0.09)	0.08 (0.08)	0.10 (0.53)	0.86 (1.01)
Parents' Chinese language skills ("little to none" as the reference category)					
intermediate	-0.21 (0.31)	-0.03 (0.07)	-0.05 (0.04)	-1.13** (0.46)	3.36* (1.79)
advanced	0.45 (0.37)	0.21*** (0.08)	-0.04 (0.13)	-1.03* (0.58)	-1.74*** (0.58)
Grandparents' Chinese language skills ("little to none" as the reference category)					
intermediate	0.60 (0.43)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	0.61** (0.28)	-0.75 (1.12)
advanced	-0.18 (0.34)	0.04 (0.07)	-0.12 (0.08)	1.00** (0.42)	-0.57 (1.09)
Father's occupation (running business as the reference category)					
managerial or professional	-0.67*** (0.19)	-0.00 (0.05)	0.09*** (0.03)	0.25 (0.29)	-3.79** (1.62)
non-manual (general staff or skilled worker)	-0.27 (0.32)	-0.14** (0.06)	0.01 (0.11)	0.46** (0.22)	-3.27** (1.46)
farmer or manual worker	-0.43 (0.30)	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.04 (0.12)	0.48 (0.39)	5.89*** (1.49)
Knowledge about "Belt and Road" Initiative ("quite some" as the reference category)					
some		-0.18*** (0.05)	0.23*** (0.05)	-1.02 (0.67)	-2.30*** (0.72)
little to none		-0.27*** (0.05)	0.10** (0.05)	-0.90* (0.51)	-2.65*** (0.68)
Parents' Monthly Income	0.40*** (0.13)				
Square of parents' monthly income	-0.02*** (0.01)				
Constant	-3.15 (1.93)	1.99*** (0.13)	2.09*** (0.31)	1.96 (1.25)	13.18*** (3.55)
Effect estimation					
ATE			0.96*** (0.35)		0.21*** (0.04)
POM (Thailand)			5.50*** (0.24)		0.73*** (0.04)

Note: standard errors adjusted for clusters in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

The significant coefficients for both parents' income and its quadratic term indicate that, in general, the higher the parent's income, the more likely the student is to study in Shanghai.

However, this effect diminishes as parents' income increases. After reaching a vertex of 100,000 ($0.4/-2*(-0.02)$) Bhat per month, the effect turns negative. This is consistent with our speculation that truly wealthy Thai families may have more options when sending their children abroad to study. Previous research suggests that overseas business opportunities may motivate business families to send their children abroad, and the current study adds further evidence to this line of research by demonstrating that Thai students whose fathers hold managerial or professional positions are less likely to go to Shanghai than those whose parents run businesses.

Model 5 examines changes in attitudes towards the Chinese people by comparing outcome regressions in the Thailand and Shanghai regimes. In the Thailand regime, males, those whose parents have advanced Chinese language skills (most likely first-generation Chinese immigrants themselves), and those who are knowledgeable about the Belt and Road initiative have more positive attitudes towards the Chinese people. In terms of father's occupation, students whose fathers are general staff or skilled workers have more negative views of the Chinese than those whose fathers run businesses. This pattern can be explained by the contact opportunities their families have with mainland Chinese people: those from business families in Thailand may have more opportunities for contact, such as business trips to China, than general staff or skilled workers. As argued by Pettigrew (1998), even casual contacts can improve intergroup opinions.

In the Shanghai regime, where all students have daily contact with locals under relatively optimal conditions, there were no differences seen in the opinions held towards the Chinese people between those whose fathers are general staff or skilled workers and those whose fathers run businesses. However, those whose fathers hold managerial or professional positions had slightly better (0.09) opinions of the Chinese compared to those whose fathers run businesses. As we previously discussed, this may be due to cultural capital inherited or habitus formed from middle-class upbringings. It may be surprising that, in Shanghai, those who are unfamiliar with the Belt and Road initiative have a more positive view of the Chinese, which is the opposite of what was observed in Thailand. However, Intergroup Contact Theory can help explain this finding: since the Belt and Road initiative is closely tied to business opportunities, those who are already in Shanghai but are unfamiliar with this widely reported project may be more likely to personalize the Chinese people they interact with, rather than viewing them as potential business partners or customers.

Model 5 estimates the ATE of studying in Shanghai on attitudes towards the Chinese people to be 0.96, or a 17% increase, which is higher than the RA estimate of 0.68 obtained in Model 2. This suggests that, in terms of attitudes towards the Chinese people, intergroup contact experiences in Shanghai are more transformative for those who are unlikely to study in Shanghai. Therefore, by controlling for the self-selection effect, the results provide support for Hypothesis 1.

Model 6 examines attitudes towards the People's Republic of China. In the Thailand regime, the effect of parents' Chinese language skills is negative. This may be because recent Chinese immigrants or diasporas in Thailand (who are now around 50 years old) hold negative views of their home country from the time when they left, which can then influence the attitudes of their children (average age 22 in the sample). However, descendants of earlier immigrants from China tend to have more positive views of China. In terms of fathers' occupations, those whose fathers are general staff or skilled workers have more favorable views of China than those whose fathers run businesses. Although Thai media is often critical

of China on certain issues, it also acknowledges China's successes in combating corruption and developing its economy (Hewison, 2018), which may be particularly appealing to those with some education and stable employment in non-authoritative positions.

In the Shanghai regime, the negative effect of parents' Chinese language skills persists, indicating the enduring influence of their parents who may have fled socialist China. In terms of father's occupation, those whose fathers run businesses or are farmers/manual workers have more favorable views of China than those whose fathers hold managerial/professional positions or are general staff/skilled workers. As we previously discussed, the latter two groups, with their moderate to high levels of education, are more likely to own cultural capital and be stably employed. In contrast, businesspeople, farmers, and manual workers are constantly facing risks and competition in markets. Therefore, the economic vitality in Shanghai may be particularly impressive to them. In terms of knowledge about China, the more a student knows about the Belt and Road initiative, the more likely they are to hold favorable views of China. This is in line with the way that the Chinese government and media portray the initiative as mutually beneficial.

Model 6 estimates that favorable attitudes towards China in the Thailand regime are 73%, with an ATE of studying in China of 21%, which is similar to the marginal effect estimated using logistic regression in Model 3 and the RA estimate of the ATE in Model 4. Overall, the findings provide evidence in support of Hypothesis 2.

While more advanced models in this study suggest a higher ATE for attitudes towards the Chinese people (ranging from 0.68 in Model 2 to 0.96 in Model 5), they do not seem to have much impact on attitudes towards China. However, it is only through the counterfactual framework that the differences in attitudes towards China along fathers' occupations are revealed in Model 4 and Model 6. Additionally, the use of IPWRA estimators (Model 6) that include a treatment model can provide more reliable results, as they are double robust (Wooldridge, 2007).

The following subsection compares the predicted POMs and ATEs of students with different social origins.

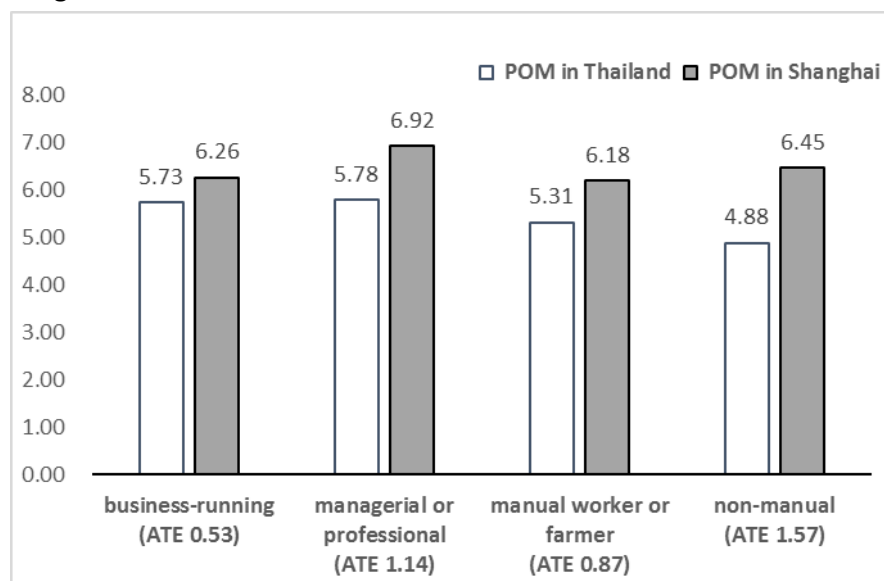


Figure 2. Predicted attitude changes towards the Chinese people based on father's occupation

Figure 2 shows that studying in Shanghai significantly improves attitudes towards the Chinese people among those whose fathers hold non-manual, managerial, and professional jobs. This supports Hypothesis 3, as determined by the results of the IPWRA estimator.

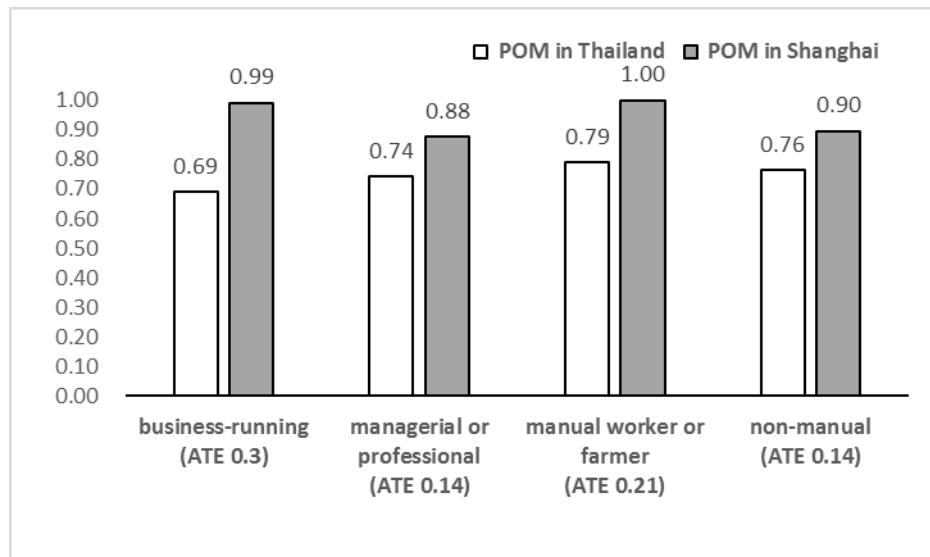


Figure 3. Predicted attitudes changes towards China based on father's occupation

Figure 3 illustrates that studying in Shanghai significantly improves attitudes towards China among those whose fathers run businesses and those whose fathers are farmers or manual workers. These groups, who are familiar with the risks and opportunities of markets, show the greatest improvement in attitudes. This supports Hypothesis 4, as determined by the results of the IPWRA estimator.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Intergroup contact theory (Allport et al., 1954/1979; Pettigrew, 1998) suggests that attitudes towards outgroups can be improved through intergroup contact in specific optimal conditions. However, international students may not always find themselves in such optimal conditions. Hence, the extent to which international students improve their opinions towards the host country and its people can vary on a case-by-case basis. In this study, we posit that Shanghai, China, may offer international students relatively more favorable, if not optimal, intergroup contact conditions. To investigate the impact of studying in Shanghai on the transformation of opinions among Thai tertiary-level students regarding the host country and its people, we employed a counterfactual analysis framework in the current study. This framework utilizes samples from both Thailand and Shanghai, China, enabling us to assess the overall effect of studying abroad on these opinions. Results from the IPWRA estimator used in the study suggest that direct experience with the Chinese people and China's development in Shanghai significantly improves Thai students' attitudes towards China and the Chinese people by around 20%. Moreover, incorporating Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), this study finds that individuals whose fathers are involved in business or regularly navigate market risks and opportunities exhibit a higher sensitivity to changes in their opinions towards China. On the other hand, individuals whose fathers possess cultural capital and have stable employment demonstrate a heightened sensitivity to changes in their attitudes towards the Chinese people.

Neither host countries nor international students are ideal (Lomer, 2017). By examining these specific intergroup contact conditions and students' social origins, we provide a

baseline for future studies to further explore the perspective/opinion changes of international students. For example, the positive effect found in our study may be weaker among students from global south to global north, or where the home and host countries have conflicting national interests. It is likely that international students in other parts of China will also experience varying degrees of attitude change towards China, albeit potentially worse than those studying in Shanghai. Additionally, it would be intriguing to explore how students from diverse social backgrounds differ in their evolutions of opinions towards the host country and its people when confronted with unfavorable intergroup contact conditions.

Many governments seek to improve their national image or strengthen soft power by recruiting international students (Gallarotti, 2022). However, international students do not automatically become a reservoir of goodwill (NAFSA, 2003). It is crucial to establish a comprehensive understanding of whether or not, to what extent, and how students can change their opinions towards the host country and its people due to their time spent studying abroad. Our contribution to this research agenda lies on two fronts. Firstly, we address the limitations of relying upon a single sample to argue that studying abroad alone is the reason behind specific attitudes towards the host country and its people. Our counterfactual approach offers a more scientifically robust method for establishing causality in this context. Secondly, while numerous factors at both the country and individual levels contribute to explaining students' opinions or attitudes, we make use of Bourdieu's concept of habitus and examine students' social origin to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms that drive attitude changes. By referring to habitus, or the deeply ingrained dispositions, values, and cultural frameworks that individuals acquire through their socialization process, we can uncover the hidden influences and ingrained predispositions that shape their perceptions and attitudes.

The family background or social origin perspective has practical implications as well. Public diplomacy, originating during the Cold War, strives to cultivate widespread support and forge emotional connections among individuals from diverse backgrounds in foreign nations, rather than solely targeting the elite (Yeo & Gloria, 2023). In addition to enhancing intergroup contact conditions, the current study recommends that governments also consider the students' familial background, instead of simply viewing them as mere students, in order to maximize the effectiveness of public diplomacy efforts. Previous research has found that economic interdependence or ties do not necessarily lead to positive opinions of foreign countries when economic or security threats are perceived (Huang & Chu, 2015; Lee & Hao, 2018; Miller & Taylor, 2017). This study found that overseas experiences can dispel negative opinions of China among Thai students from urban lower-middle-class families (whose fathers are general staff or skilled workers). These unconventional international students deserve more attention from policymakers and practitioners in the fields of education and diplomacy as the pool of international students continues to grow.

There are, of course, certain limitations to this study that should be considered when interpreting its findings. One of these limitations is that the use of counterfactual analysis may not be fully reliable for determining causality. After all, the data collected in the study may have certain limitations that could have an impact upon the overall quality. Additionally, the assumptions required for this method to be valid may not have been fully addressed (King & Zeng, 2007). Therefore, it is recommended that future research test the findings of the current study through more rigorous longitudinal studies that follow students from prior to their leaving their home country. Another limitation is that cross-cultural attitudes can change over time (Doxey, 1975). This study did not consider the time students spent in China, so the

effects of studying in Shanghai are presented as general findings. It is also worth noting that the attitudes of international students can be influenced by a range of complex and contingent factors (Bislev, 2017; Paradise, 2012). Despite these limitations, it is crucial to highlight that imperfect data does not necessarily invalidate the study's findings. Future research should consider integrating the practice of international students with their pre-arrival habitus in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their attitudes towards the host country and its people.

DECLARATIONS

Author Contributions: This work was equally shared by the two authors.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding: None.

Ethical Approval: Data for this quantitative study were collected through anonymous surveys, and personal information of the participants was not collected.

Data Availability Statement: Data for this study is available upon request.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to express their gratitude to the School of International Relations and Public Affairs at Fudan University for their assistance.

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