

## A STUDY ON IMPROVING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF CHINESE STUDENTS IN THAILAND

Yu Cheng<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Thailand has always been China's very friendly partner. Since Thailand is located in the center of Southeast Asia, it is geographically close to China. The education cost in Thailand is considered low for Chinese families. The open policy of Thai government brings more opportunities to Thailand. Thailand has advantages in offering business opportunities, including international educational business. Due to the differences in language, cultural background, academic pressure, and climate, it is inevitable for Chinese students to encounter difficulties in Thailand. In order to assist Chinese students to meet their academic goals, and to serve the society and the community during their stay in Thailand, this research is designed to examine the composition of intercultural communicative competence and relationships between each components, clarify the main factors that affect intercultural communicative competence of Chinese students in Thailand, and build a model to improve intercultural communicative competence of Chinese students in Thailand.

**Keywords:** Intercultural communicative competence, intercultural adaptation, Chinese students, Thailand.

### Introduction

Human beings have entered the era of globalization. Intercultural communication has become the characteristics of the times. Intercultural communicative competence has become a necessary quality of modern social talents (Dai Weidong, Zhang Hongling, 2000). In the context of globalization, the collision, communication and integration of different cultures is an unavoidable reality, and the closed age of any national culture has passed. Cultural communication breaks the space limit, and the cultural information that people accept is beyond the physical space. People of different nationalities, different regions, different ethnic and cultural backgrounds are more and more frequently by direct and indirect contact and dialogue, have cross-cultural awareness acumen and strong ability to cross-cultural communication is the communication that the success of the decisive factors (Yan Aijing, 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> Ph.D Candidate in Management, International College, National Institute of Development Administration, Thailand  
695131680@qq.com

The relationship between China and Thailand has been developing steadily and healthfully since the establishment of diplomatic relations. The profound traditional friendship between the two countries, known as "China and Thailand are one family", has been proved to be the most reliable in the diplomacy of the new period. The two countries have established a full range of good neighborhood and mutual trust partnership. In China-Thailand relations, cultural exchanges between the two countries are becoming increasingly active and become a highlight of China-Thailand relations. Thailand has always been China's very friendly partner. Since Thailand is located in the center of Southeast Asia, it is geographically close to China. The education cost in Thailand is considered low for Chinese families. The open policy of Thai government brings more opportunities to Thailand.

Thailand has advantages in offering business opportunities, including international educational business. Chinese students have become the major source of foreign students in Thailand since year 2006. The Office of Higher Education Commission of Thailand indicates that there were 9329 Chinese students enrolled in Thai higher education institutes in year 2010, which accounted 46.4% of the total foreign students in Thailand. The data from the Royal Thai Consulate—General in Kunming stated, there are exceeding 10000 Chinese students studying in Thailand by year 2014. Chinese students comprise indeed the largest group of international students in Thailand. The report also pointed out that the top five countries of origin of international students are from China, Myanmar, Vietnam, North America and Laos. The international students are studying Business Administration, Marketing Management and Thai language and Education in 44 universities all over Thailand. In 2008, the office of the Higher Education Commission conducted a survey on the enrolment of foreign students in Thai higher education institutions. The results of the survey showed that 16,361 international students enrolled in 96 Thai higher education institutions. The top five institutions that had the highest enrollment of foreign students are Assumption University (2,558 students), Chulalongkorn University (1,329 students), Mahidol University (1,069 students), Burapha University (591 students), and Rangsit University (487 students). The popular fields of study among foreign students are Thai language, Business Administration, English language, and International Business and Marketing. (HEI, Thailand, 2008).

### **Research Objectives**

The main objective of this study is to find out ways to improve intercultural communicative competence of Chinese students in Thailand. Specifically, the objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the composition of intercultural communicative competence and relationships between each components.

2. To clarify the main factors that affect intercultural communicative competence of Chinese students in Thailand.
3. To build a model to improve intercultural communicative competence of Chinese students in Thailand.

### **Literature Review**

The concept of communicative competence was first proposed by American sociolinguist Dell Hymes in the "communicative competence" published in 1972. He believed that communicative competence is composed of the following four factors: (1) grammar, a statement about whether (and how much) may be formed; (2) for a statement, whether (and how much) is feasible; (3) the appropriateness of a statement, whether (and in how much) is appropriate; (4) a statement of reality, whether (and how much) actually appeared. In Hymes's view, a person's communicative competence should include not only grammar knowledge and language ability, but also psychological (feasible), social culture (appropriateness) and application probability (actually appearing). Since Hymes (1972) proposed the concept of communicative competence, western scholars have carried out a great deal of research on intercultural communication competence. Lustig & Koester (2007) and other scholars points out that the competence of intercultural communication is composed of three dimensions, context, appropriateness and validity, knowledge, motivation and behavior. Ruben (1976) put forward seven theories of communicative dimensions, namely, seven elements of behavior that enable individuals to communicate effectively in Intercultural Communication: knowledge orientation, interaction attitude, role behavior, empathy, interaction management, respect and ambiguity tolerance. The European Union mode of Byram (1997) pointed out that the purpose of intercultural competence is to enable individuals to have intercultural related attitudes, knowledge, objective assessment of cultural awareness, discovery and interaction skills, explanation and narrate skills. At the same time, Byram (1997) also pointed out the important role of language competence in its intercultural communication mode, and included cultural understanding and cultural identity in its definition of intercultural competence. In addition to the language level, Byram believed that a more comprehensive definition of intercultural competence should also include non verbal aspects, such as anxiety and social situations. In addition, he further put forward a new framework, which contains skills, emotions, knowledge and other elements which have been recognized by other scholars. However, the definition of these elements by Byram is slightly different from other scholars. Byram divided knowledge into two categories: (1) knowledge about communicating with others and social groups; (2) knowledge of self and critical cultural awareness, including the ability to evaluate their own culture and practical activities and

achievements of foreign cultures. Skills were divided into two major categories: (1) skills in explaining and connecting; (2) the skills to discover and interact. Byram's definition of cross-cultural attitudes is to describe and evaluate the beliefs, values and behaviors of themselves and others in a more open perspective. Byram pointed out that the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and intercultural competence (IC) is different, the elements of intercultural competence is the skills, knowledge and attitudes, and intercultural communicative competence in these elements, including certain linguistic competence, discourse competence and social language ability. Spitzberg & Cupach (1984) believed that intercultural communication competence is composed of three factors, knowledge, motivation and skills, and the three are interdependent and interacted. Intercultural communicative competence requires enough cross-cultural knowledge, positive motivation and effective communication skills. The three factors should be possessed at the same time, and no one factor can constitute cross-cultural communicative competence alone.

Judith Martin and Thomas Nakayama (2009) pointed out the four elements of intercultural competence in the new mode of intercultural competence, namely, emotional factors, mental activity characteristics, knowledge factors and situational characteristics. Imahori & Lanigan (1989) pointed out that the specific elements of intercultural competence are knowledge (communicative rules, linguistic knowledge, general cultural knowledge, individual cultural knowledge), motivation (attitude), skills (interaction management, respect, empathy).

They believe that the elements of intercultural competence include other elements such as past experience and personal goals. The difference between this model and other definitions and patterns is that, compared with the individual's cross-cultural behavior, it emphasizes the interaction between the two sides of the communication. Therefore, the final result of communication is the result of communication and interaction between the participants. English (1998) on the review of famous scholars such as Barrows et al. (1981); Dinges (1983); Hanvey (1976); Hett (1992); Tonkin & Edwards's (1981) works, studied the different definitions of intercultural competence. He also screened the Lambert (1994) defined on intercultural competence, and on this basis the five elements of intercultural competence: knowledge of the world, the identity of foreigners and their language (attitude), the other concept of cultural identity (attitude), foreign language ability, show skills in an international environment. Among the five elements, the definition of world knowledge (geography, event, history, politics and economy) is exactly the same as that of other scholars.

Spitzberg (1993) believed that the cross cultural competence model should include three systems, such as individual, plot and relationship. The individual system involves all the characteristics that the individual obtains to help effectively communicate, with the main aspects of knowledge, motivation and skills. The plot

system refers to the characteristics necessary for the communicative parties to communicate successfully in a specific communicative situation. The relationship system not only helps a particular situation, but also contributes to the whole relationship category in the cross cultural communicative competence. The relationship between the three systems are interrelated and progressive, that is to say the plot system is based on the personal system and the relation system is the sum of the plot system. Gudykunst, Professor of California State University, divided the basic elements of intercultural competence into eight aspects: showing respect, seeking knowledge, empathy, communication control, event behavior, relational behavior, ambiguity tolerance and communicative attitude. The cultural competence model of Campinha-Bacote (1998) pointed out the five interdependent parts of intercultural competence development: intercultural knowledge, cross-cultural collision, cross-cultural awareness, cross-cultural skills and cross-cultural desire. Wiseman (2001) believed that the elements of intercultural competence are skills, knowledge, and motivation required for effective and appropriate cross-cultural communication with people.

Wiseman's further definition of intercultural competence is a series of emotions, intentions, needs and drivers that anticipate or actually participate in intercultural communication. Young Yum Kim (2001) thought that the elements of intercultural competence include emotional competence (motivation and attitude inclination, emotional and aesthetic tendency), behavioral ability (flexibility) and cognitive ability (understanding). These three abilities are interdependent and interact with each other. Scholars in China and other countries have widely adopted and quoted Samovar & Porter (2004) for the classification of cross-cultural competence, which is divided into three aspects of knowledge, skills and motivation. Imahori & Lanigan (1989) pointed out that the specific elements of intercultural competence are knowledge (communicative rules, linguistic knowledge, universal cultural knowledge, individual cultural knowledge), motivation (attitude), skills (interaction management, respect, empathy). They believe that the elements of intercultural competence include other elements such as past experience and personal goals. The difference between this model and other definitions and patterns is that, compared with the individual's cross-cultural behavior, it emphasizes the interaction between the two sides of the communication. Therefore, the final result of communication is the result of communication and interaction between the participants. English (1998) on the review of famous scholars such as Barrows et al. 1981; Dinges, 1983; Hanvey, 1976; Hett, 1992; Tonkin & Edwards, 1981 and other works, studied the different definitions of intercultural competence. He also distinguished the Lambert (1994) definition of intercultural competence, and put forward on the basis of the intercultural competence of five elements, namely the identity of foreigners and their knowledge of the world, language (attitude), the other concept of cultural identity

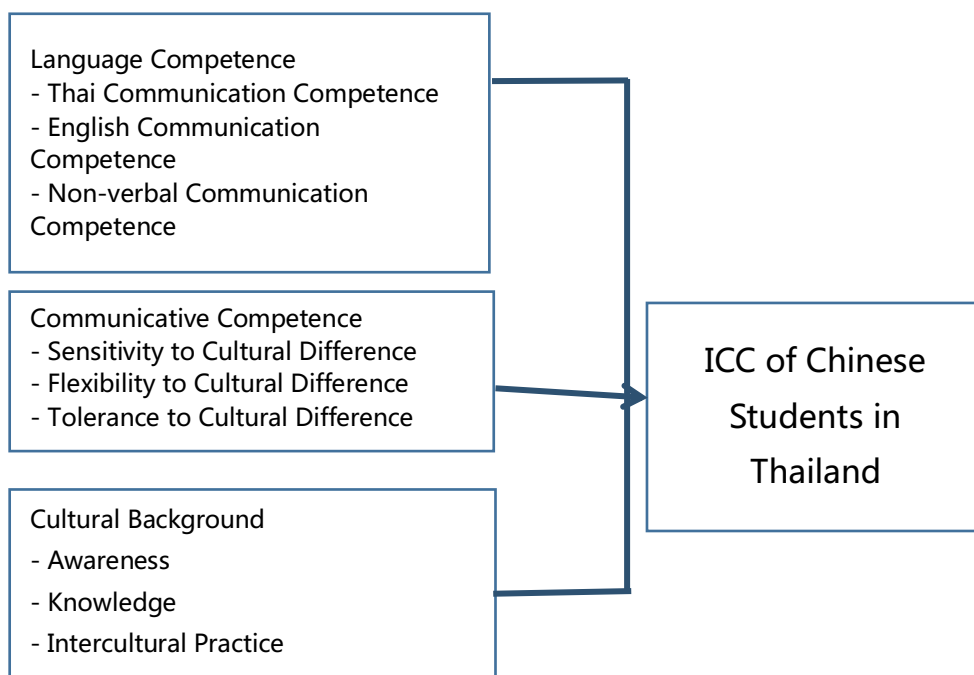
(attitude), foreign language ability, showing skills in an international environment. Among these five elements, the definition of world knowledge (geography, event, history, politics and economy) is exactly the same as that of other scholars. In addition, the relevant definitions also include attitudes and skills. The definition of Lambert (1994) focused on the ability of individuals to demonstrate skills in an international environment, which shows the essence of this definition in particular situations. Judith Martin and Thomas Nakayama (2009) pointed out the four elements of intercultural competence in the new mode of intercultural competence, namely, emotional factors, mental activity characteristics, knowledge factors and situational characteristics.

Scholars in different fields of research have put forward their own views on the elements of intercultural communication competence, Fantini (1994) describes the elements of intercultural communicative competence from several sides and sums it into five elements, which are (1) a series of features or characteristics (flexibility, patience, curiosity, empathy, tolerance to ambiguity and no good or bad judgment); (2) four dimensions (awareness, knowledge, attitude and skills); (3) three aspects (the ability to build and maintain relationships with people, the ability to minimize loss and misinterpretation in communication, the ability to cooperate for common interests); (4) proficiency in a second language, including vocabulary, grammar and phonetic system; (5) various of a longitudinal and developmental process, consisting of four phases (traveler, sojourner, professional and intercultural / multicultural specialist). Although different scholars have identified differences in the components of intercultural communicative competence, most of them involve three aspects of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Knowledge in intercultural communicative competence includes two aspects. Byram (1997) thought that on the one hand is knowledge about the social groups and cultures in their own countries and the other countries, and on the other hand is knowledge about the communication process at the individual level and social level. In intercultural communication, if the corresponding knowledge is lacking, the interlocutor may violate the rules of communication, so a certain knowledge of intercultural communication is necessary. The research shows that the relevant knowledge of self culture and other cultures, as well as the fluency of communicative language and intercultural communication ability are positively related. Specifically, the knowledge level of intercultural communicative competence should include: (1) knowledge and similarities and differences between ethnic cultures and foreign cultures; (2) contextual knowledge; (3) foreign language knowledge; (4) nonverbal knowledge; (5) knowledge of culture, psychology and sociology. Wiseman (2000) believes that the motivation in intercultural communication is the will, sense, motivation and demand that truly participate in intercultural communication. Factors that influence communicative motivation, such as ethnocentrism, communication anxiety and prejudice, will affect

both sides' understanding of cross-cultural communication, whether positive or negative. Therefore, in order to improve the intercultural communication ability, it is necessary to guide the interlocutor to have a proper motivation for intercultural communication.

### Conceptual Framework

To find ways to improve intercultural communicative competence of Chinese students, the first step is to find out what knowledge, skills, attitudes, strategies and other key elements are necessary for successful intercultural communication. The purpose of this study is to explore how to improve Chinese students' intercultural communicative competence in Thailand, the researcher will first analyze the principle, characteristics and relationship of intercultural communication; then study the framework of previous research in intercultural communication in China and other countries; thus analyze the results of empirical research; hence explain the relationship between all the key elements of intercultural communicative competence and main factors influencing Chinese students' intercultural communicative competence in Thailand; finally provide suggestions to improve Chinese students' intercultural communicative competence in Thailand. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of this study.



**Figure1. The Conceptual Framework of This Study**

### **Research Instruments**

The researcher adopted a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods in the study. On the basis of the literature review, the researcher first compiled a questionnaire on intercultural communication competence.

Through the statistical analysis of the questionnaire, the researcher tries to determine the components of the intercultural communication competence and provide reference information for the in-depth interview. Respondents will be asked to answer the question with the Likert five point scale. (5 = very agreeing, 4= agreement, 3= neutral, 2 = disagreement, 1 = very disagreeing).

The researcher then conducted in-depth interview with Chinese and Thai teachers who have rich knowledge and experience in intercultural communication; Thai students who often get along with Chinese students; and Chinese students who have certain cross-cultural communication ability from selected higher education institutions in Thailand.

The interview questions include: 1. Please give a brief introduction to your basic situation, including the experience of study and work. 2, please briefly describe the basic situation of communication with Chinese students in the work and life. 3. What do you think is the content of intercultural communication competence? 4. How do you think we should improve intercultural communication skills?

### **Research Findings**

The research is designed to examine the composition of intercultural communicative competence and relationships between each component, indentify the main factors that affect intercultural communicative competence of Chinese students in Thailand, and build a model to improve intercultural communicative competence of Chinese students in Thailand.

On the basis of the literature review, and the real situation of Thailand, the researcher compiled a questionnaire on intercultural communication competence, and then distributed 300 questionnaires in 9 universities in Thailand to test the research questions, and 202 questionnaires were successfully collected by the researcher. Descriptive statistics including mean, and standard deviation were used to demonstrate information of respondents. Table 1 below shows the statistical results of the questionnaire.



**Table 1.****The Results of Means and Standard Deviations on Students' Intercultural Communication Competence**

<b>Cultural Background</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Levels</b>
Cultural Awareness	4.34	0.42	Strongly Agree
Cultural Knowledge	3.62	0.73	Agree
Intercultural Practice	3.42	0.56	Agree
<b>Language Competence</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Levels</b>
Thai Language Skills	4.29	0.41	Strongly Agree
English Language Skills	3.75	0.69	Agree
Non-verbal Skills	2.58	0.84	Disagree
<b>Communicative Competence</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Levels</b>
Sensitivity to Cultural Difference	2.31	0.76	Disagree
Flexibility to Cultural Difference	4.15	0.53	Agree
Tolerance to Cultural Difference	2.27	0.65	Disagree

Concerning cultural background, students agree that understanding the knowledge of social communication etiquette, taboos, social customs, daily habits and their influence, and the process of social activities in the two countries will help to improve intercultural communicative competence of Chinese students in Thailand. Students agree that understanding the historical knowledge, religious knowledge, educational system and political situation in the two countries will help to improve intercultural communicative competence of Chinese students in Thailand.

Students agree that having the ability to find behavioral differences in the process of communication, having the ability to understand different interpretations of the same phenomenon, having the ability to find misunderstandings in communication, having the ability to formulate communication strategies according to the communicative environment, and having the ability to formulate communication strategies based on the situation of the communicator will help to improve intercultural communicative competence of Chinese students in Thailand. Referring to language competence, students agree that mastering phonetic knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, grammatical knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, and folk adage of Thai language will help to improve intercultural communicative competence of Chinese students in Thailand.

Students agree that mastering phonetic knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, grammatical knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, and folk adage of English language will help to improve ICC of Chinese students in Thailand. Regarding to communicative competence, students agree that changing oneself actively and adjusting to the new culture, communicating with local people actively and making friends with local people, seeing and explaining problems from new angles, showing

interest to another culture, and the willingness to abide by the cultural habits will help to improve intercultural communicative competence of Chinese students in Thailand. Based on the statistical results, the researcher then conducted in-depth interview with Chinese and Thai teachers who have rich knowledge and experience in intercultural communication; Thai students who often get along with Chinese students; and Chinese students who have certain cross-cultural communication ability from selected higher education institutions in Thailand in order to find the causes of problems in intercultural communication, importance of intercultural communication, specific components of intercultural communicative competence, and ways to improve intercultural communicative competence.

Most of the interviewees emphasized the comprehensiveness of intercultural communication competence, and believe that intercultural communication competence includes not only cultural knowledge, language knowledge and language ability, but also professional knowledge, professional competence, social competence and personal comprehensive quality. Intercultural communication competence includes not only factors that directly affect the process of intercultural communication, such as language ability and communicative skills, but also factors that are indirectly involved in intercultural communication, such as learning ability and wide interest.

There are complementary and alternative functions among all elements of intercultural communicative competence. For example, non-verbal communicative competence plays the role of supplementation and substitution for language communicative competence; being brave, confident and sincere can make up for the lack of language communication ability. Sensitivity to culture can make up for the lack of cultural knowledge. Intercultural communicative competence includes not only direct and indirect factors, but also complementary and alternative functions among the elements, and the difficulties of intercultural communication in intercultural communication are mainly due to language barriers and cultural differences.

At the knowledge level, intercultural communication involves many aspects of knowledge, including cultural knowledge, language knowledge and other knowledge. In the level of competence, intercultural communication is a comprehensive ability; language ability is the basis of intercultural communication. The attitude level can be summed up in two categories: the category of communication and the category of personal. It is generally believed that respect and politeness are essential to intercultural communication. All of them believe that successful cross-cultural communication requires better personal self-cultivation.

## **Discussion**

The majority of the Chinese students in this research have spent one or more

continuous year in Thailand at the time of the survey. Most of them indicated that they have planned to go home once or twice a year. When the university vacation is about over, most of them feel glad to get ready to come back to their universities in Thailand from China, but very few of them however, feel depressed. What they miss the most when in Thailand is family and food back home. The survey results indicated that, when first arrived, most of the Chinese students basically could not speak Thai at all, and English was the first language to communicate with Thai people and Thai friends in the universities.

However, need is a great influence, and after spending a period of time in Thailand, most of the Chinese students can speak Thai fairly well, and Thai language is becoming their first language to communicate with Thai people. Many of them still insist however that although they speak better Thai now, they still sometimes have communication problems with Thai people. These Chinese students tend to live in groups.

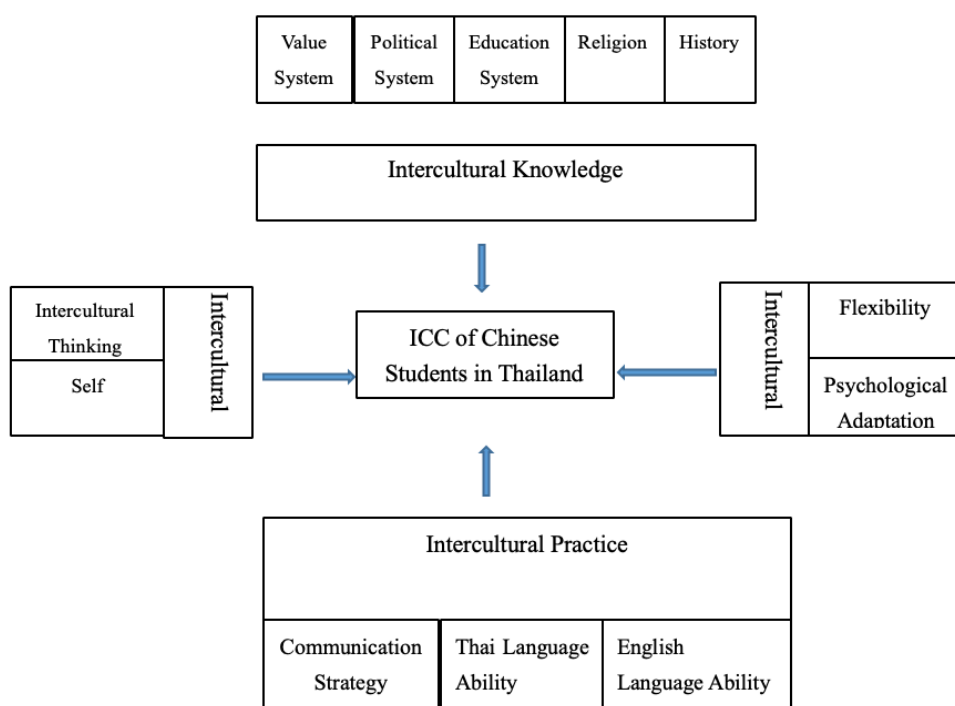
The majority of them naturally wish to have fellow Chinese students as roommates, most of their friends are still Chinese students and when in need, they would ask their Chinese friends for help first. The majority of the Chinese students in this survey also confess that lives as students abroad in Thailand, while pleasant on the average, could sometimes be boring without knowing what to do and where to go. Cultural and linguistic misunderstandings are the major problems of their studying and living. They claim that on personal levels, they suffer emotional incompatibility. When asked if they notice any changes after coming to study in Thailand in terms of personal development, some of the students say that there are no obvious changes while some of them admit to have acquired the knowledge and maturity.

Many Chinese students have come to realize that it is not enough just to be able to speak some Thai, but it is also very important to understand something of Thai traditions and customs in order to avoid a lot of misunderstandings. Having lived in Thailand for around a year, naturally, more than half of them have participated in and enjoyed Thai traditional festivals such as, Songkran and Loi Khatong, but they go to Thai temples only on special occasions and seldom celebrate and do the merit-making in temples on Buddhist days as much as the Thai people do. In terms of the social conditions of Thailand, the majority of the Chinese students indicate that Thailand is modern in some ways such as being in line with international norms, especially the tourism industry and the service industry.

Thailand is a safe place to live in with beautiful beach resorts but the society is jumbled and out of order. As for China-Thailand relations, the majority of Chinese students agree that the relationship between Thailand and China have been very stable and cordial and that the two countries have maintained a bond of friendship all through history, but this relationship relies on the political and diplomatic conditions.

The majority of them declare that the casual and free atmosphere of Thailand makes it very attractive to stay on indefinitely after graduation for personal development and future plans if there are good opportunities. Presently, however, decisions on whether or not to stay on here could not be decided due to the unknown and changing situations.

Overseas Chinese students are the largest group among students from other countries studying in Thailand. In order to provide Chinese students with high quality of educational services, and also to enable them to better adapt themselves to Thai society and help them to understand Thai culture better, the researcher proposed a new model for improving ICC of Chinese students in Thailand.



**Figure 2. A model for improving the intercultural communicative competence of Chinese students in Thailand**

Intercultural communicative competence is composed of intercultural awareness, intercultural adaptation, intercultural knowledge and intercultural practice. The four elements are inseparable, and together constitute the framework of intercultural communication competence. Lack of any one of the ability will affect the realization of intercultural communicative competence. At the same time, there is a hierarchical relationship between the four elements: intercultural awareness is the most basic ability in intercultural communication. Without the sensitivity and comprehension of

intercultural awareness, intercultural adaptation and intercultural knowledge can not be learned and mastered. Intercultural adaptation is the second level of intercultural communicative competence. On the basis of intercultural awareness, the ability to cultivate psychological adaptation and flexibility will be beneficial to the effective completion of intercultural communication. The mastery of intercultural knowledge is the third level of intercultural communicative competence. The knowledge of communicative culture is based on intercultural awareness and intercultural adaptation. Based on this, learners will treat cultural differences in a correct way, better grasp intercultural knowledge in the comparison and identification of different cultures, and understand and analyze culture by intercultural thinking. Intercultural practice is the highest level of intercultural communicative competence.

It is necessary to point out that the hierarchical relationship between the four elements does not represent the distinction of its importance, and does not mean that the cultivation of the four abilities in intercultural competence training is carried out separately. On the contrary, in the process of intercultural competence, the cultivation of the four elements should be carried out at the same time.

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