CHINESE STUDENTS' DECISION-MAKING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THAI MARKET

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of an exploratory mixed-methods study into the consumer purchase decisions about higher education in Thailand by Chinese students. The research is based on a theoretical model by Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino (2006). Four factors in the consumer decisions –personal reasons, country image effect, institution image, and programme evaluation – were examined. The study used a student questionnaire (n = 80) and a focus group (n = 10). Participants were Chinese students at different universities in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. The questionnaire was analysed using a structural equation model. This analysis showed that institution image and programme evaluation were significant factors in the choice of a Thai university, but the country image effect and personal reasons were not. In contrast, the focus group interviews showed that personal reasons like language development, was essential to students as well as institution image and programme evaluation, but country image was less important for their choice.

Key Words: purchase intention, consumer behavior, higher education, decision-making

INTRODUCTION

Currently, there is a mass movement of students studying abroad; the amount of the group doubled from 2.1 million in 2000 to 4.5 million in 2011 globally. The number expected for 2014 is about 5 million, with a rising trend to 2015 (OECD, 2013). Asia alone was the source region of more than half of all students studying outside their home country. Growth of the figure is mainly attributable to China, India, and South Korea. Together these three top nations account for more than 25 percent of internationally mobile students. However, now the pattern of student movement is shifting from English-speaking countries to the trend called intra-regional mobility, where students who study abroad but within their home region (ICEF Monitor, 2014; Sharma, 2014).

Thai government policy positioned the country as an international education hub by creating a strategy based on three strengths: leading academic institutions with international standards, a variety of curricula for all levels of students, and educational exhibitions and activities (Ministry of Education, 2008). Recently the Department of International Trade Promotion responded to the programme and organised the "Thailand International Education Expo: The 10th TIEE" in February 2013, focusing on the theme "Live & Learn in Wonderful Thailand" (Thai Trade Center Los Angeles, 2012).

The decreasing birth rate in many nations including Thailand resulted in less of the population in higher education. Therefore academic institutions pay attention to seeking foreign students instead. Chinese students form one of the target markets, given this huge demographic. Thus, this paper contributes to investigating and understanding factors influencing Chinese students' decision making regarding higher education in Thailand. Furthermore, the paper provides information on the current international education market situation.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of marketing of higher education institutions

From an academic viewpoint, international students are hardly perceived as consumers of a university (Bejou, 2005). Many marketers' research tends to use the concept of exchange, which also reflects the meaning of marketing itself. Educational academies are offer both tangible and intangible services (Liechty and Churchill, 1979). They provide programmes, degrees, social interaction between seniors and juniors, facilities like IT centres, libraries and cafeterias, and other benefits to their students. This is in exchange for tuition fees, donations and other support (Kotler and Fox, 1995). Both sides decide to exchange, and finally end up better off.

The quality of intangible services is defined by the people who provide them, such as lecturers and administrative officers (Gibbs and Murphy, 2009). Liechtly and Churchill (1979) argued that education is the most intangible of all services. With the difficulties of judging the service, students then encounter a high risk during course and university selection process (Ali-Choudhury, Bennett and Savani, 2009).

This paper uses the marketers' perspective by examining some of the models influencing a decision-making process, especially for higher education selections. Nonetheless, in order to set the framework of this paper, the consumer decision-making process is introduced before touching on the purchase intention, which is the focal point. The concept of programme or educational institution selection by international students is still limited and little explained (Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino, 2006; Maringe and Carter, 2007). International students in this study consist of Chinese students willing to attain higher education in Thailand, which consists of bachelor, master, and doctorate programmes. A general model of consumer decision-making is presented first, followed by the specific model specifically for the higher education market.

Consumer decision-making in higher education

Consumer decision-making has been studied by various researchers focusing on their own target groups (Kotler, 2003; Mullins et al., 2004). Studying the area of higher education marketing is still in an early stage (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). This is mostly done for a specific institution and based in the UK and Australia, rather than Thailand. The earliest research on consumer decision-making in education was done by Chapman (1981). Chapman explained that students' decisions are affected by their characteristics as well as the external influences. The consumer decision-making process represented in Figure 1 was developed by Kotler and Armstrong (2006, p. 147). Consumers are passing along five steps when they are in a new and complex purchase situation. The process consists of need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and postpurchase behaviour. It is important that marketers pay attention to every stage, not only purchase decisions.

Figure 1: Consumer decision-making model
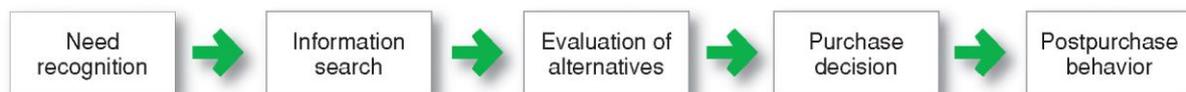
Source: Kotler and Armstrong (2006, p. 147)

Understanding of the process can give higher education institutions insight into students' perceptions and major needs. This can facilitate organisation to differentiate institutions from competitors and create a powerful marketing strategy (Wiese, Van Heerden and Jordaan, 2010). Furthermore, knowledge of choice factors influencing the students' decision will give deep insight into their final decision, which is the aim of this paper.

Purchase intention in higher education

Analysing consumers' intentions is a common method used by marketers to investigate the real behaviour of target buyers (Blackwell, Miniard and Engel, 2006; Ghalandari and Norouzi, 2012). The word intention alone refers to the prior factors that influence and lead clients' actions (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2010). Azjen (1991) agreed that intention not only encourages people but also affects their purchase actions. According to the previous research, the greater the intention strength, the higher the possibility of purchase behaviour (Kim and Pysarchik, 2000). The highlight of this study is to explore how Chinese students' choices to study abroad, in this case in Thailand, are impacted by the features surrounding them (Woodside and Martin, 2008).

The specific model of purchase intention developed for the education market is established by Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino (2006, p. 107). There are five factors affecting the consumer decision-making process: personal reasons, country image effect, city effect, institution image, and programme evaluation. Each type is measured by sub-issues shown in Figure 2. Nevertheless, this researched model is based on existing concept reviews, so the nationality of respondents (students) varies. However, this study tests the model for one race of students, Chinese only. Moreover, the geographic scope is narrowed in order to benefit the Thai higher education market.

Figure 2: Purchase Intention Model
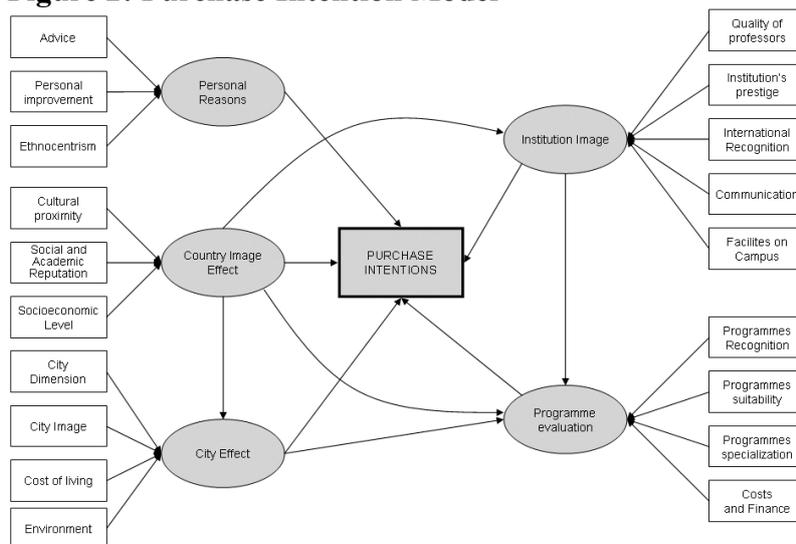
Source: Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino (2006, p. 107)

As this is pioneering research, some complexity is reduced due to the limited time; therefore factors in the purchase intention model are used with the exception of city image. Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino, as quoted in Hilden (2013, p. 24), reported that "student's perception of the destination city will also influence the decision process as well as the country image". The elimination is also supported by Hilden's (2013) research on international students' decision-making process in Finland. Hilden excluded the city image as it is a part of the country image.

Hypothesis one: Personal reasons have a positive influence on students' purchase intentions regarding higher education

According to Dawes and Brown (2002), Kim (2004), Nora (2004), Yamamoto (2006), and Raposo and Alves (2007), personal factors have the highest positive influences when students

select a university. Especially for Asians, reference groups are very effective, for example opinions of siblings, friends, peers, relatives, and teachers (Bourke, 2000; Ceja, 2004; Yamamoto, 2006, p. 561; Pimpa and Suwannapirom, 2008; Wagner and Fard, 2009). In British education, Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) found that half of the students sampled trust alumni networks as the key personal marketing strategy for the country.

Hypothesis two: The country image effect has a positive influence in students' purchase intentions regarding higher education.

Country socioeconomic status, as found by Chung, Fam and Holdsworth (2007), is not an important factor for international students in New Zealand. However, McMahon (1992) noted that a host country's economic size relative to the home country's influences student choices. McMahon's study result showed a negative relation between economic prosperity in home countries and the quantity of international student flows. Moreover, the geographic relationship between host and home countries is viewed as an essential factor (Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton, 2004; Tavares et al., 2008). Some researchers agreed that the country has a greater impact than the institution (Srikatanyoo and Gnoth, 2002). Maringe and Carter (2007, p. 461) stated that students choose to study in England first, and the university comes later. The scope of internationalism and globalisation makes the country issue even more significant in choosing the learning destination.

Hypothesis three: The institution image factor has a positive influence in students' purchase intentions regarding higher education

Moving on to the institution image, Qureshi (1995), Mazzarol (1998), and Bourke (2000, p. 114) showed that a positive image led to students' decisions to enrol in institutions. The measured factors related to institution image covered four out of six factors in an education marketing mix presented by Mainardes et al. (2011), which consisted of the education service, price of education, communication in education, place in education, people in education, and process in education. Place in education is represented by facilities on campus. Institution prestige and international recognition are the education service. Communication in education belongs to the communication factor. Finally, people in education is mentioned as a quality of professors. However, creating a strong appearance of an educational institution definitely takes a long time (Kotler and Fox, 1995). Consequently Peng, Lawley and Perry (2000) suggested that marketers put their effort into creating a powerful programme image instead. And they also showed that a programme evaluation is more important than either country or institution image.

Hypothesis four: An effective of programme evaluation is reflected mainly by the costs and finance

The programme falls into the 'place' factor of the education marketing mix (Mainardes, 2011, p. 49). And 'price' is shown by costs and finance. A study of universities in South Africa stated that financial aid offered ranks only 5th in the list of significant factors (Beneke and Human, 2010). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) discovered a medium correlation between the fee and number of student applications, with decreasing tuition fee having a moderate effect on Asian students. On the other hand, the cost of attendance is said to be very essential by the research of Maringe and Carter (2007, p. 469) and Qureshi (1995, p. 166), as it represents the risk encountered by students and their family. According to some other business viewpoints, the

education fee is like an investment in a person, the return reflected by salary received in the future. People will invest only when they expect to earn more in the future (Domino et al.).

METHODOLOGY

This study utilises factors affecting purchase intentions developed by Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino (2006, p. 107) to examine Chinese student decision-making in higher education. Since all methods have their own strengths and weaknesses, mixing them compensates for some disadvantages of each other (Kent, 2008). Data is collected in a sequential process (Creswell, 2009). Beginning with a quantitative approach through questionnaires, and followed with qualitative research using a focus group (Davey, 2005), to determine the levels of significance of each element and capture some advice and opinions that are not covered in the model. In order to provide in-depth understanding of the influences affecting international students' decisions to study abroad, Rudd, Djafarova and Waring (2012) stated that qualitative analysis is needed.

Questionnaires' questions are developed from the Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino (2006) model with the exception of city image, so there are four latent variables measured based on observed variables that emerged from the literature. The survey is divided into Section A and B and is in English only. The former part is personal information and the latter covers the dimensions of each issue. For the second part, answers are in the form of scales, ranked from one to five. According to a five-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932), each item has five response categories running from totally disagree to totally agree: one means totally disagree, two is disagree, three stands for medium or neither agree nor disagree, four is agree, and five means totally agree.

The pilot survey was tested in order to ensure that there were no misunderstandings of words and sentences were easy to interpret, as well as to confirm the investigation was accurate and adequate (Curwin and Slater, 2008). From the pilot review, some sentences were adjusted and the survey was prepared for the next stage, collection.

A non-probability, convenience sampling of 80 questionnaires was conducted through Chinese student respondents who studied in Thailand, mostly in Chiang Mai while others were from Bangkok. In Chiang Mai, forms were completed by Chinese students enrolled in Chiang Mai Rajabhat University and Chiang Mai University. In Bangkok, respondents were from Assumption University of Thailand. Concerning the problem of the return rate, 200 questionnaires were sent out, and resulted in 98 returns. Some surveys were eliminated due to incomplete answers, therefore researchers used only the 80 qualifying questionnaires.

A focus group is a form of qualitative data collection. One focus group was held with ten Chinese students selected by convenience sampling; all of them were registered as Chiang Mai Rajabhat students, but in different academic years. Burns and Bush (2006) recommended focus groups as they can generate insights and attitudes. This method therefore provided a concentrated discussion regarding the most influential factor for Chinese student decision making (Rudd, Djafarova and Waring, 2012, p. 133). Focus groups are planned and arranged for a specific date and time to suit the availability of every respondent. Moreover, respondents are asked to agree to the interview beforehand. Respondents do not need to provide their names and only the information received is examined.

Information was analysed using a structural equation model (SEM) through the AMOS statistics programme to ensure that under the circumstance of a similar cultural background (Chinese students), students' decision-making process can still be established using those factors shown in Figure 2 (or not). Initially for SEM, the measurement model is tested using seven fit index statistics: comparative fit index (CFI), goodness of fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), root mean

square residual (RMR), normed fit index (NFI) and incremental fit index (IFI). The result will show the observed variables' standardised factor loading for each latent factor. Finally, the factors' influence effect on purchase intention is verified.

FINDINGS

Quantitative results

The quantitative model's explicit variables included personal reasons, country image effect, institution image, and programme evaluation as factors in the consumer decision for a specific institution in Thailand. Figure 4 shows the model fit summary for the SEM test of this framework.

Figure 4: Model Fit Summary
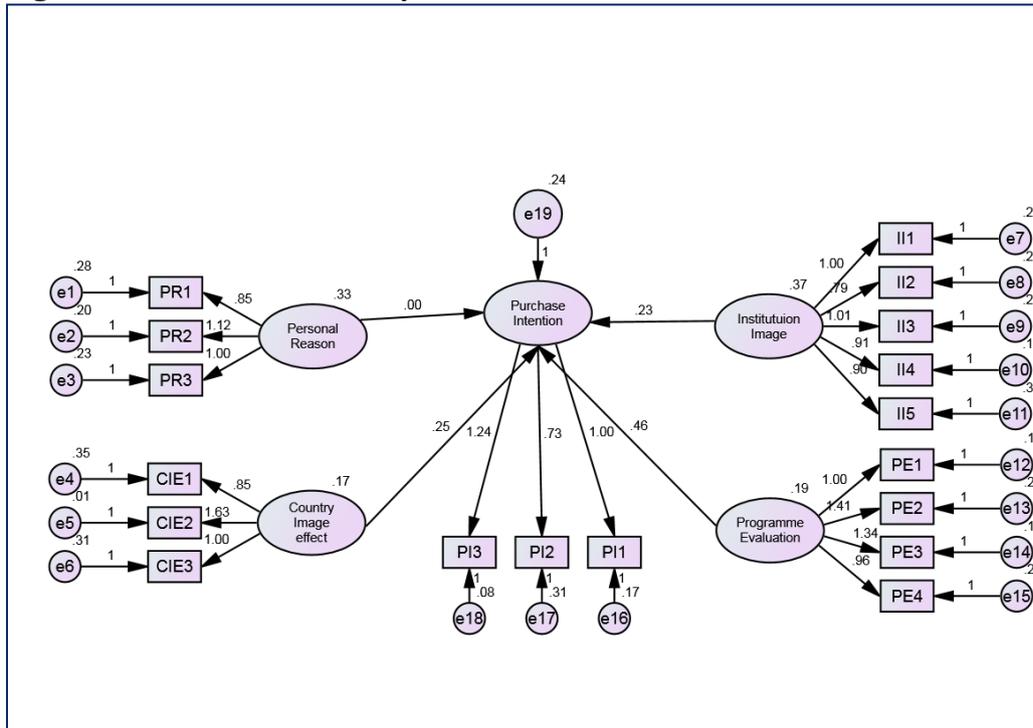
This model did not display a strong goodness of fit. The Akaike information criterion (AIC) for the default model was the smallest of all three considered models ($AIC_{Default}$ = 317.186, $AIC_{Saturated}$ = 342.000, $AIC_{Independence}$ = 972.162). This indicates that the default model is the best fitting of all three models tested. However, other measures of fit did not indicate that the default model showed a strong fit. GFI and AGFI showed moderate goodness of fit (GFI = 0.784) (AGFI = 0.718). This indicates that 78.4% of variance/covariance can be explained by the model (using the GFI figures). This is not enough for absolute acceptance of the model, but since GFI and AGFI are sensitive to small sample sizes (Byrne, 2010), and this study had a sample size of n = 80, this is not enough to reject the model. The RMSEA value for the default model did not reach the < 0.05 threshold (RMSEA = 0.091). However, many of the fit indicators (including CFI and IFI) approached acceptance levels. Overall, this was not a closely fitting model, which is explained by the regression weights (as one factor was insignificant). However, it is moderately well fitting at a level that could be explained as descriptive.

Table 1: Summary of descriptive approximate fit measures for default model

Criterion	Value	Level indicating good fit	Did model deliver good fit?

AIC	316.186 (Default) 342.000 (Saturated) 972.162 (Independence)	(Comparative)	Best fitting model produced was default
CFI	0.866	> 0.95	No
GFI	0.784	> 0.95	No
AGFI	0.718	> 0.90	No
RMSEA	0.091	< 0.05 = Close fit 0.05 to 0.08 = Approximate fit > 0.08 = Poor fit	No
RMR	0.110	<0.10	No
NFI	0.748	>0.90	No
IFI	0.869	>0.90	No

Source for acceptance values: Byrne (2010)

The regression weights for each of the measured variables (Table 2) demonstrate the significant factors in the purchase decision. Significant factors in purchase intention included institution image (p = 0.019) and programme evaluation (p = 0.002). Personal reasons (p = 0.979) and image (p = 0.079) were not significant, although image approached significance. Variances are shown in Table 3.

Table 2: Regression weights for default model

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
Purchase Intention	<---	Image	.246	.140	1.755	.079	
Purchase Intention	<---	Personal Reason	.003	.104	.026	.979	
Purchase Intention	<---	Institution Image	.233	.099	2.348	.019	
Purchase Intention	<---	Programme Evaluation	.465	.147	3.163	.002	
PR3	<---	Personal Reason	1.000				
PR2	<---	Personal Reason	1.119	.182	6.146	***	
PR1	<---	Personal Reason	.847	.143	5.910	***	
CIE3	<---	Image	1.000				
CIE2	<---	Image	1.627	.423	3.849	***	
CIE1	<---	Image	.850	.191	4.453	***	
II1	<---	Institution Image	1.000				
II2	<---	Institution Image	.786	.113	6.940	***	
II3	<---	Institution Image	1.013	.126	8.068	***	
PE1	<---	Programme Evaluation	1.000				
PE2	<---	Programme Evaluation	1.408	.198	7.098	***	
PE3	<---	Programme Evaluation	1.344	.179	7.524	***	
PE4	<---	Programme Evaluation	.963	.156	6.163	***	
II4	<---	Institution Image	.912	.112	8.139	***	
II5	<---	Institution Image	.900	.130	6.899	***	
PI1	<---	Purchase Intention	1.000				

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
PI2	<---	Purchase Intention	.725	.124	5.842	***	
PI3	<---	Purchase Intention	1.236	.159	7.763	***	

Table 3: Variances for default model

	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
Personal Reason	.332	.086	3.866	***	
Image	.167	.064	2.624	.009	
Institution Image	.369	.086	4.313	***	
Programme Evaluation	.194	.049	3.962	***	
e19	.237	.056	4.248	***	
e3	.229	.055	4.158	***	
e2	.205	.063	3.261	.001	
e1	.279	.051	5.455	***	
e6	.307	.057	5.342	***	
e5	.011	.098	.116	.908	
e4	.353	.057	6.164	***	
e7	.248	.045	5.524	***	
e8	.230	.038	6.015	***	
e9	.199	.039	5.113	***	
e12	.163	.029	5.549	***	
e13	.253	.049	5.116	***	
e14	.139	.035	3.965	***	
e15	.221	.037	6.011	***	
e10	.153	.031	5.017	***	
e11	.308	.051	6.036	***	
e16	.171	.040	4.307	***	
e17	.311	.048	6.436	***	
e18	.078	.049	1.605	.109	

The estimates indicate that programme evaluation has the highest impact based on regression weight (0.46), followed by institution image (0.23).

In summary, the hypothesis outcomes are as follows:
- Hypothesis 1: Rejected. Personal reasons did not have a significant impact on student purchase intentions regarding higher education.
- Hypothesis 2: Rejected. Country image did not have a significant impact on student purchase intentions regarding higher education.
- Hypothesis 3: Accepted. Institution image did have a significant impact on student purchase intentions regarding higher education.
- Hypothesis 4: Accepted. Programme evaluation did have a significant impact on student purchase intentions regarding higher education.

It should be noted that these results are based on a small sample ($n = 80$). SEM typically requires a much larger sample to work effectively, with minimum samples often being twice as large as standard regression tests. This model was shown to have a poor fit based on approximate fit

criteria. Thus, although these results were relatively weak it is possible that this is because of the sample size.

Qualitative results

In addition to the quantitative research, a focus group was also used to assess reasons for choosing to study in Thailand at the higher education level. The focus group discussion included ten Chinese students. This discussion revealed a much wider set of reasons for choosing to study in Thailand than were found in the literature review. Some evidence was also found for these factors. The most important difference is that rather than personal reasons like family relationships, the main reasons found were cultural and language competence and growth. This speaks to a cultural openness and adventurousness that may not be easy to satisfy at home.

Institutional image

Institution image did play a role in some students' decisions to study in Thailand. One student remarked, *"The teachers here help me to improve my knowledge and adapt to a different culture."* A second stated, *"Education in Thailand is very systematic."* A third student stated, *"Having international dormitory inside the university is great and very convenience."* Another student identified the university as a second home and have everything needed. Others agreed that institution gave them a foreign communication environment, thus they always need to speak English every day. As one student stated, *"Environment is important, I stayed in international dormitory surrounded by other foreign students. If I cannot speak with them I will feel very lonely."* This shows that there is a positive image of the institution among the Chinese student.

Programme evaluation

Students are mention highly on programme evaluation in their choice of Thailand or Chiang Mai to study. *"The programme schedule allow us to both study and doing activities, which give us a chance of knowing other Thai students."* Other comments are, *"I can select three free elective subjects so I chose Thai language and Thai dance, it was one of my best experience"*, *"My most excited part of the programme was in forth year. I have to work outside in the real company [field experience subject] for the whole semester. I love it so much."*

Some of them are enjoyed on the low-cost of Thai education, one student said that *"I paid equally for an international programme tuition in Thailand compared with a normal programme in other countries."* Another student agreed on the reasonable of a low-living cost, *"Food and accommodation in Thai is worth for money."* Part of student mentioned, *"Scholarship is the main topic, if I did not get it, I cannot afford to the costs."* Therefore, students are considered on a programme evaluation as a significant factor for their education choices.

Country image

Relatively few students explicitly mentioned the country image. One student identified the Thai people characteristic as a factor in their choice, stating that *"[Thai] people are kind hearted. They all help me a lot."* Another student identified Thailand as a peaceful country with a positive image. The diplomatic and cultural connections of Thailand and China were also viewed as an issue. As one student stated, *"At present China and Thailand has a good connection with economics and trade. It creates many life choices."*

Personal reasons

Cultural competence and intercultural experience was one of the major reasons for choosing to study in Thailand. One student remarked that this study allowed her to *"learn and study the local culture,"* while another indicated that *"language improvement"* was a major goal. Another remark was that *"As a student who wants to improve languages, learning surroundings are so important. I think Thailand gives more chance for this."*

Other students also agreed that learning the Thai language and about Thai culture, along with making friends from other cultures, was a main reason for studying in Thailand. Students were interested in not only learning Thai, but also learning English and interacting with people from other cultures. One student stated, "*There are many foreigners in Thailand, so when we are studying, we can encounter more different cultures from different countries. We can open our mind and spread our wings*." Thus, studying in Thailand is seen as a form of cultural freedom compared to the students' homeland.

There were some reasons that were more about future experience or life rather than the direct experience of learning. A few students expressed future intentions to work in Thailand or in different countries than China. One student stated that "*I want to know the local culture and I want to get an opportunity to get a job in Thailand after I graduate*." For another, the choice was driven more by family needs. "*My family wants me to study in Thailand… if I can understand Thai people and culture, I can help my family's export business in future*." Thus, forward-looking personal choices were also an issue.

Summary

Students all had different reasons for studying in Thailand. However, there are some themes that were shared among them. Students had a positive image of Thailand, viewing it as a peaceful, beautiful culture, nice people, and comfortable place with low living cost. They also had positive images of education in Thailand in general and of the institution. One of the strongest common denominators was that students liked the programme evaluation, including activities and the field experience in the last semester. They also wanted to improve their language skills, particularly English. For some students, this was a future-oriented choice, with students seeking future economic advantages either within their family context or, for example, jobs in Thailand. Thus, while personal reasons did predominate, these were mainly economic or academic reasons rather than those that were family-related. Country image played relatively little role in the decision.

DISCUSSION

The quantitative and qualitative results had relating outcomes. The quantitative results indicated that the significant factors in student purchase decisions for university education in Thailand included institution image and programme evaluation. Personal reasons and country image did not have a significant impact. Moreover, when discussing the reasons for studying in Thailand in the focus groups, the most significant reasons also included programme evaluation and institution image. However, personal reasons did appear as considerable issue and there are some factor that did emerge included language skills and intercultural contact, and potential future economic gains like being able to work in Thailand or help family firms. Country image is determined to be not important effect for both methods. These findings conflicted with the literature review, which suggested that all four factors would be important. One reason for these conflicts is probably the relatively undeveloped state of the literature on consumer decisions for university choice (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Most of the studies that have been undertaken have not taken place in the Thai market or among Chinese students, and as a result there could be some variation.

Personal reasons are obviously a major factor in the literature review and the focus groups, though it was not significant in the SEM. The model of purchase intention proposed by Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino (2006) did identify personal improvement, which is one of the major reasons identified in the focus groups. Specifically, language and intercultural contact was identified as a reason for studying in Thailand, although personal reasons on the whole were not significant in the SEM. The focus groups also showed positive views of Chiang Mai, which was consistent with these authors' inclusion of a city effect component in their model

(Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino, 2006). Thus, this research may have been less limited had it imposed the full model, rather than following Hilden's (2013) lead by eliminating the city effect component of the Cubillo et al. (2006) model.

Similarly, institution image was important in the literature review (Qureshi, 1995; Kotler and Fox, 1995; Mazzarol, 1998; Bourke, 2000; Peng, Lawley and Perry, 2000; Mainardes, et al., 2011). It was significant in the SEM and had major support in the focus group. Therefore, it is possible that students were likely to choose *Thailand* because of the institution image. This could also be true for the programme evaluation. Programme evaluation relates to the students' views on the specific programme they choose, such as its recognition, suitability, specialisation, and costs and finance (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). It is possible that Chinese students have focus on this area. Furthermore, it is more likely that students choose the institution and programme first, then the country; thus, the country image may have less impact on their choice to study in Thailand generally.

However, a number of studies did identify the country image effect as significant for students (Srikatanyoo and Gnoth, 2002; Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton, 2004; Tavares et al., 2008; Maringe and Carter, 2007). This was not identified as a factor in the SEM and only limit number of student mentioned about the image of Thailand. The reasons for this are unclear, but it may be because of the limited sample size or because of inadequate specification of the country image factor. This is one of the problems of this study, though this was not unexpected given the exploratory nature of this research.

Overall, it is clear that the theoretical model presented by Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) of consumer decisions for higher education do not fully explain the choices of Chinese students in Thailand. However, cultural variations in context could be part of the reason for this gap, as could other reasons like measurement imprecision resulting from small sample sizes.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the reasons for Chinese students choosing to complete higher education programmes in Thailand. Thai government policy has positioned Thailand as an international education hub, developing leading academic institutions and academic activities at all levels. As a result of this activity, Thailand has drawn students from around the Asian region. Many students in Asia do choose to study abroad internationally, with students from China, India and South Korea making up more than a quarter of students studying internationally. However, there has been very little study of the decision to study abroad as a consumer decision. In fact, the decision of where to study is barely considered as a consumer decision at all, even though it is clear that to some extent it is one.

The study adapted the conceptual framework of the student choice of study location proposed by Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) for an exploratory study of Chinese students in Chiang Mai and Bangkok. The main factors that were studied included institution image, country image, programme evaluation and personal reasons. The study used a mixed-methods approach. A quantitative survey (n = 80) and a focus group (n = 10) were used to collect information about reasons for study. The quantitative study, which was analysed using SEM, showed that institution image and programme evaluation were the significant factors in programme choice. However, feedback from the focus groups suggested that the personal reasons (desire for cultural and language development and encounters with other cultures as well as future employment) is the additional significant factor. These minor conflicting results suggest that students have a number of different reasons for studying abroad. However, much more research is needed in order to understand those reasons.

The main recommendation for universities from these findings is that they should emphasise the opportunity for developing language skills and intercultural competence through

cultural encounters. This is an area that was identified as a positive characteristic of Thailand in the focus groups and one that drove the decision to study in Thailand for several respondents. This could help improve the positive image of the Thai educational experience and help bring in more Chinese students.

The main recommendation for the academic field is that more study is needed on the motivations of international students. There was relatively little research available in the literature review and much of this was exploratory research. This led to inadequate guidance for the current study. Focusing more on the decision to study abroad could help explain the choice of university as a consumer decision, as well as the motivations regarding international contact and development of personal cultural competence.

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APPENDIX

Abbreviations

CIE1	Cultural proximity
CIE2	Social and academic reputation
CIE3	Socioeconomic level
II1	Quality of professors
II2	Institution's prestige
II3	International recognition
II4	Communication
II5	Facilities on campus
PE1	Programme recognition
PE2	Programme suitability
PE3	Programme specialisation
PE4	Costs and finance
PI1	Purchase intention 1
PI2	Purchase intention 2
PI3	Purchase intention 3
PR1	Advice
PR2	Personal improvement
PR3	Ethnocentrism