

Dining Experiences of Chinese International Students in a Thai University Cafeteria

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ABSTRACT: Dietary adaptation is an important part of international students' everyday adjustment, and university cafeterias are among the settings in which students most frequently encounter the host country's food culture. This study explored how Chinese international students formed and interpreted their dining experiences in the cafeteria of Lampang Inter-Tech College, Thailand. Thirteen Chinese international students were recruited through purposive sampling and interviewed using a semi-structured guide. The data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding procedures. The analysis yielded 176 coding references, which were organized into 14 subcategories, five main categories, and one core category. The five main categories were cafeteria dining experience, influencing factors, adaptation process, cross-cultural experience, and improvement needs. Participants' evaluations involved taste characteristics, preferred and disliked dishes, regional dietary habits, menu variety, price, hygiene, convenience, and nutritional balance. Dietary adaptation varied across participants: some gradually accepted selected Thai flavors, whereas others maintained familiar eating habits through self-cooking, off-campus dining, or choosing Chinese food. Dining experiences were also associated with familiarity, homesickness, cultural learning, time management, and daily convenience. Participants primarily recommended greater menu variety, more balanced flavors, more affordable prices, improved nutritional options, additional service counters, and meal-reservation services. The findings offer practical implications for improving inclusive campus food services for international students.

Keywords - Chinese international students; university cafeteria; dining experience; grounded theory; dietary adaptation

1. INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education has increased student mobility and made cross-border education an important feature of contemporary higher education [1]. When students enter a new cultural environment, they must adjust not only to academic and linguistic differences but also to changes in everyday routines, social relationships, and food practices [2, 3]. Dietary adjustment is especially relevant because food is encountered daily and is closely connected to comfort, identity, physical well-being, and life satisfaction [4, 5]. Food is both a biological necessity and a carrier of culture. Countries differ in ingredients, cooking techniques, seasoning practices, and eating customs [6]. Chinese cuisine is internally diverse, while Thai cuisine is often characterized by combinations of sour, sweet, spicy, and aromatic flavors. Such differences may create both interest and difficulty for Chinese students studying in Thailand. University cafeterias are therefore important not only as food-service facilities but also as everyday environments in which international students encounter local food practices and evaluate institutional support.

Previous studies have examined dietary acculturation, food choice, nutrition, and health among international students [7, 8, 9]. Other work has shown that campus food environments, food insecurity, and access to familiar foods can shape international students' daily experiences [10, 11, 12, 13]. However, fewer qualitative studies have focused specifically on how Chinese international students interpret cafeteria dining experiences in Thai universities and how sensory, personal, institutional, and cross-cultural factors are connected.

Grounded theory is suitable for examining experiences for which a sufficiently detailed explanatory framework has not yet been established. Through constant comparison and progressive category development, grounded-theory procedures allow researchers to identify concepts and relationships grounded in participants' accounts [14, 15]. Accordingly, the present study used grounded-theory coding procedures to analyze Chinese international students' cafeteria dining experiences at Lampang Inter-Tech College.

The study addressed the following research question: How are Chinese international students' cafeteria dining experiences formed, and what factors shape these experiences?

The study aimed to provide a context-sensitive account of dining experience, dietary adjustment, and cross-cultural learning and to offer practical implications for improving campus food services for international students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Chinese International Students and Cross-Cultural Adjustment

Chinese international students are Chinese citizens who pursue higher education or professional study outside China. Their adjustment may involve psychological and sociocultural dimensions, including emotional well-being, everyday competence, social participation, and the ability to function within the host environment [2, 3]. Studies in Thailand have similarly identified language, academic demands, daily-life arrangements, and institutional support as important aspects of Chinese students' adjustment [16, 17, 18].

2.2 University Cafeterias and Dining Experience

University cafeterias provide routine meals and form part of the campus service environment. For international students, they may also serve as settings for cultural contact, social interaction, and judgments about institutional care. Campus food environments can influence food choice, perceived convenience, healthy eating, and students' overall experience of university life [10, 12]. In the present study, cafeteria dining experience refers to students' overall perceptions and evaluations of cafeteria food and services, including flavor, dish choice, price, hygiene, convenience, emotional responses, and cultural meanings.

2.3 Dietary Acculturation and Food-Related Adaptation

Dietary acculturation refers to changes in food practices that occur when individuals encounter a new cultural environment. Such changes may involve the adoption of local foods, maintenance of familiar diets, selective acceptance, or the use of multiple strategies across settings [7, 9]. Research with international students has shown that unfamiliar ingredients, restricted access to preferred foods, cost, convenience, cooking facilities, and cultural identity may all shape dietary transitions [4, 8, 13]. Therefore, adaptation should not be understood as the complete replacement of an original diet by the host diet; it may instead involve negotiation between familiarity and experimentation.

2.4 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was introduced by Glaser and Strauss [15] and was subsequently developed into structured procedures for open, axial, and selective coding [14]. Open coding identifies initial concepts, axial coding organizes related concepts into categories, and selective coding integrates categories around a central phenomenon. These procedures were used in the present study to organize participants' accounts and develop an exploratory model of cafeteria dining experience.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative design and used open, axial, and selective coding procedures informed by grounded theory. The approach was selected because cafeteria dining experience is subjective

and context-dependent and may reflect interactions among sensory perceptions, personal food histories, institutional conditions, and cross-cultural adjustment.

3.2 Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 13 Chinese international students enrolled at Lampang Inter-Tech College. All participants had direct experience of eating in the university cafeteria. The sample included master's and doctoral students from different academic fields and with different lengths of residence in Thailand and levels of cafeteria use. Participant codes were used in place of names.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Academic Level	Major	Length of Stay in Thailand	Cafeteria Use
A	Female	Master's	Physical Education	About 20 days	3–5 times
B	Male	Master's	Journalism, Communication, Film and Drama Studies	About 1.5 years	2–3 times per week
C	Female	Master's	Educational Management	21 days	4 times
D	Male	Doctoral	Educational Management	Since July 2024	Frequently in the past
E	Male	Master's	Educational Management	About 20 days	Almost every day
F	Male	Master's	Educational Management	About 20 days	More than 10 times
G	Male	Master's	Educational Management	About 1 year	4–5 times per week
H	Female	Master's	Educational Management	About 20 days	About 5 times
I	Male	Master's	Business Administration	About 1 year	Twice daily
J	Male	Master's	Educational Management	Since July 2024	Dinner on most teaching days
K	Male	Doctoral	Management	About 1.5 years	Many times
L	Female	Master's	Educational Management	Since January 2025	4–5 times
M	Male	Doctoral	Art and Design	Since July 2024	Occasionally

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews covering participants' dining habits, first impressions of the cafeteria, preferred and disliked dishes, perceived influences on dining decisions, dietary adjustment, cross-cultural experiences, and suggestions for improvement. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, checked, and anonymized before analysis.

The transcripts were examined line by line. The analysis produced 176 coding references. Related codes were grouped into 14 subcategories and then integrated into five main categories: cafeteria dining experience, influencing factors, adaptation process, cross-cultural experience, and improvement needs. Selective coding integrated these categories around the core category of the formation of Chinese international students' cafeteria dining experiences. The letters A–M identify participants, while the numbers indicate the corresponding coding topics in the original coding framework. Numbers in parentheses indicate repeated

references within an interview. Coding continued through constant comparison until later comparisons did not produce substantively new categories within the available dataset.

Table 2. Grounded-Theory Coding Framework

Core Category	Main Category	Subcategory	Representative Codes
Formation of Chinese International Students' Cafeteria Dining Experiences	Cafeteria Dining Experience	Taste Perception Characteristics (n = 16)	Spicy [A1(2), D1, E1, F1, H1(2), I1, J1]; mild [K1]; sweet [L1]; sour [A1, C1]; strong seasoning [L1]; Chinese-style flavor [E1]; Thai-style flavor [L1]
		Food Preferences (n = 13)	Tomato with scrambled eggs [F2]; braised pork ribs [B2, C2]; Mapo tofu [F2, J2]; ramen [B2]; spicy marinated dishes [B2]; fish [D2, J2]; Sichuan spicy chicken [G2]; twice-cooked pork [I2]; steamed buns [K2]; soybean milk [K2]
		Food Dislikes (n = 9)	Fish sauce [I3]; Chinese kale [C3, G3]; sweet dishes [H3]; Thai dishes [I3]; organ meats [J3]; pig trotters [J3]; strongly seasoned noodle soup [B3, L3]
	Influencing Factors	Individual Factors (n = 20)	Dietary habits [A4(3), B4, H4]; regional differences in Chinese food preferences [F4, L4, M4]; preference for spicy food [A4, G4, H4]; length of residence [A4, B4, C4, D4, F4, G4, H4, I4, M4]
		Cafeteria Environment (n = 17)	Dish variety [B5, F5, G5]; price [A5, B5, C5, D5, H5, L5]; hygiene [D5, L5]; dining environment [C5]; number of food stalls [A5, I5]; number of cafeterias [K5]; nutritional balance [E5, H5]
		Dining Conditions (n = 8)	Ordering convenience [I6]; dormitory location [E6, G6, I6]; time cost [B6, C6, I6, M6]
	Adaptation Process	Dietary Adaptation (n = 22)	Exceeded expectations [H7]; sense of home [B7, C7, H7, K7]; culture shock [A7, F7, L7]; gradual acceptance [A7, G7, I7, J7, M7]; no substantial change [B7, C7, D7, E7, H7, K7, L7]; trying Thai cuisine [A7, G7]
		Adjustment Strategies (n = 6)	Self-cooking [C8, K8]; eating off campus [C8, F8]; choosing Chinese food [A8, G8]
	Cross-Cultural Experience	Emotional Responses (n = 10)	Familiarity [F9, H9, J9, K9]; homesickness [H9, J9]; satisfaction [B9, E9, F9, J9]

Core Category	Main Category	Subcategory	Representative Codes
		Cultural Experience (n = 15)	Perceived integration of food cultures [A10, B10(3), E10, G10]; experiencing Thai food culture [A10, B10(3), F10, G10, J10(2), M10]
		Academic and Daily-Life Adaptation (n = 14)	Learning efficiency [C11, G11, I11, L11, M11]; time management [B11, C11, E11(3), M11]; daily convenience [E11, F11, I11]
	Improvement Needs	Flavor and Menu Improvement (n = 12)	Increase dish variety [B12, I12, J12, K12, L12, M12]; reduce strong seasoning [G12]; accommodate regional preferences [C12, F12]; diversify flavors [A12, H12]; improve nutritional balance [E12]
		Price and Value (n = 7)	Lower prices [A13, C13, D13, H13, J13, L13]; improve value for money [J13]
		Service and Convenience (n = 7)	More breakfast options [F14, J14, K14]; additional food stalls [A14, I14]; meal reservation [B14]; improved dining environment [L14]

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the recording procedure, the intended use of the data, and their right to discontinue participation. Informed consent was obtained before each interview. Identifying information was removed, and participant codes were used in the analysis and reporting.

3.5 Category Integration

The five main categories were interrelated rather than sequential. Sensory evaluations and food preferences were shaped by personal and institutional conditions; adaptation involved both acceptance and the maintenance of familiar practices; dining experiences were connected with emotional and cultural meanings; and improvement needs represented participants' feedback on the cafeteria environment. Figure 1 presents this exploratory relationship structure.

Five main categories are interrelated; no fixed linear sequence is assumed.

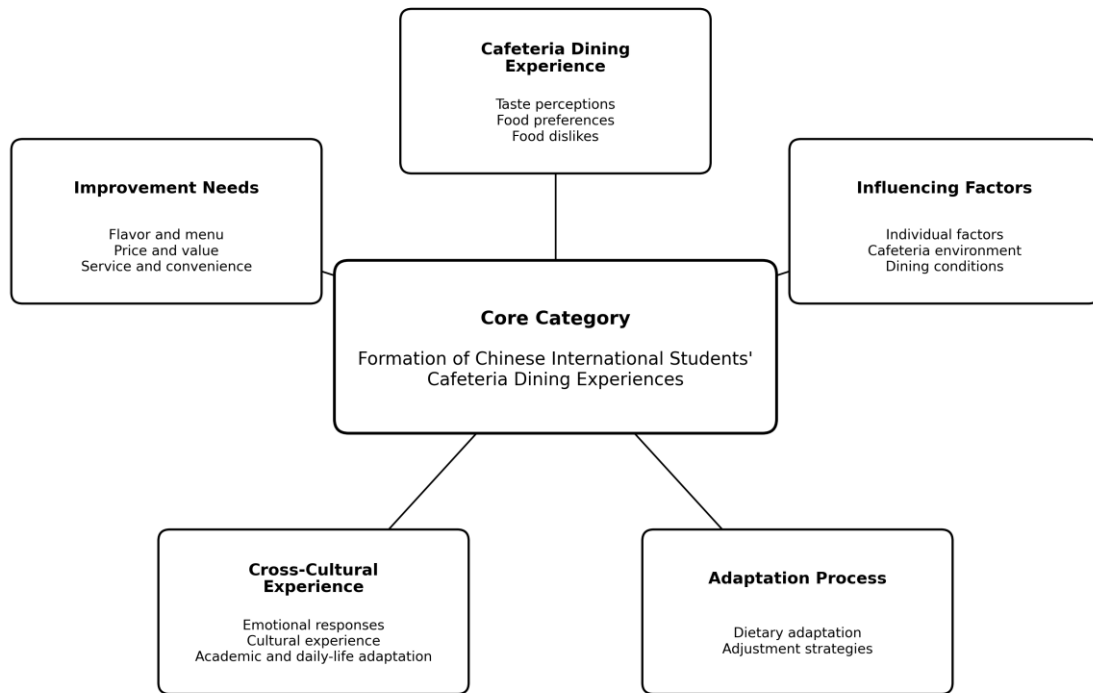


Figure 1. Exploratory relationships among the five main categories of cafeteria dining experience.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Cafeteria Dining Experience

Participants first evaluated the cafeteria through sensory impressions, preferred dishes, and disliked foods. Spiciness was the most frequently mentioned taste characteristic, while a smaller number of participants referred to sourness, sweetness, or strong seasoning. Familiar Chinese-style dishes were generally easier to accept, whereas fish sauce, bitter vegetables, organ meats, overly sweet dishes, and strongly seasoned soups were rejected by some participants. These accounts suggest that familiarity and flavor compatibility were central to initial evaluations.

“I think the food is generally quite spicy. The most obvious characteristic is its spiciness.” (Participant A)

This pattern is consistent with research showing that familiar food can provide comfort and cultural continuity for international students, while unfamiliar flavors may complicate dietary transitions [4, 10].

4.2 Influencing Factors

Dining experiences were shaped by both individual and cafeteria-related conditions. Individual factors included hometown food habits, regional differences within China, tolerance for spicy food, and length of residence in Thailand. Institutional and practical factors included menu variety, price, hygiene, nutritional balance, the number of food stalls, dormitory location, waiting time, and convenience. The data did not support a single factor as universally decisive; participants prioritized different considerations according to their circumstances. “The biggest issue is the limited variety of dishes. After eating there for about two weeks, I realized that the menu hardly changed from one week to the next.” (Participant F)

The importance of variety, price, convenience, and healthy options is also reflected in research on campus food environments and international students' food choices [12, 19].

4.3 Adaptation Process

Participants did not follow a uniform pattern of dietary adaptation. Some gradually became more willing to try selected Thai dishes, while others reported little change in their original preferences. Self-cooking, eating off

campus, and choosing Chinese dishes were used to maintain familiar tastes or avoid discomfort. Adaptation was therefore selective and individualized rather than a one-way transition toward the host diet.

“At first, I mainly looked for food that tasted like Chinese cuisine. Gradually, I have become more willing to try local Thai dishes.” (Participant F)

This finding supports the view that dietary acculturation may combine continuity and change, with individuals adopting some local practices while retaining meaningful elements of their original diets [7, 9].

4.4 Cross-Cultural Experience

Food carried emotional and cultural meanings beyond taste alone. Familiar dishes could evoke comfort or a sense of home, while unfamiliar tastes sometimes intensified homesickness. Trying Thai food was also described as a way of learning about local culture. In practical terms, convenient meals could reduce time spent searching for food, whereas dissatisfaction could lead to self-cooking or off-campus dining and alter daily schedules. These findings indicate that cafeteria dining was connected with emotional adjustment, cultural learning, and everyday organization, although the interviews do not establish a direct causal effect on academic performance or overall adaptation.

“Tasting Thai food is an important way of experiencing Thai culture.” (Participant B)

Food-related experiences may therefore form one part of broader psychological and sociocultural adjustment rather than serving as a stand-alone measure of successful adaptation [2, 3].

4.5 Improvement Needs

Participants' recommendations focused on issues directly connected with their dining experiences. They requested greater menu variety, less repetitive food, lighter or more balanced seasoning, options suitable for different regional preferences, more affordable prices, improved value for money, more breakfast choices, additional food stalls, better nutritional balance, and meal-reservation services. These recommendations represent feedback on food and service provision rather than a final stage of dietary adaptation.

“I hope the cafeteria could provide more balanced and nutritious meal combinations.” (Participant E)

The findings suggest that a more inclusive cafeteria does not require the replacement of Thai food with Chinese food. A practical approach would be to retain local dishes while providing greater choice, clearer flavor options, and a limited number of familiar alternatives.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study explored the cafeteria dining experiences of 13 Chinese international students at Lampang Inter-Tech College. The analysis produced one core category, five main categories, 14 subcategories, and 176 coding references. Cafeteria dining experience involved sensory perceptions, food preferences, and food dislikes. These evaluations were shaped by individual dietary histories, the cafeteria environment, and practical dining conditions. Dietary adaptation varied across participants and included gradual acceptance, maintenance of familiar preferences, self-cooking, off-campus dining, and selective food choice. Dining experiences were also connected with familiarity, homesickness, cultural learning, time management, and daily convenience. Improvement needs centered on menu and flavor variety, price and value, nutrition, and service convenience. The five categories were interrelated, but the cross-sectional qualitative data do not establish a fixed sequence or causal mechanism.

5.2 Practical Implications

5.2.1 Increase Menu Variety and Nutritional Balance

The cafeteria could rotate dishes more frequently, provide additional vegetable and breakfast options, and offer a limited range of Chinese-style or less strongly seasoned dishes alongside Thai food. Nutritional balance and clear information about dish ingredients would also improve students' ability to make suitable choices.

5.2.2 Provide Flexible Flavor Options

Selected dishes could be offered in mild and spicy versions, and strong sweetness or heavy seasoning could be moderated where feasible. Such adjustments would accommodate regional differences among Chinese students without removing the distinctive characteristics of Thai cuisine.

5.2.3 Improve Price, Value, and Service Convenience

The cafeteria should review price affordability and portion value, reduce waiting time during busy periods, and consider additional service counters or a simple meal-reservation system. Regular feedback channels could help cafeteria managers identify recurring concerns and evaluate whether changes are effective.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study was conducted at one institution and involved a small purposive sample, so the findings are context-specific and are not statistically generalizable. Participants differed substantially in their length of residence and frequency of cafeteria use, which may have shaped their accounts. The study relied on self-reported interview data and did not include observation, dietary assessment, or longitudinal follow-up. Future research could compare students at different universities and stages of residence, conduct longer interviews, and examine how dining experiences change over time. Quantitative or mixed-method studies could subsequently assess the relative importance of food quality, price, convenience, dietary familiarity, and institutional support.

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