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Exploring Chinese International Students' Experiences in the 'Life and Works of Rizal' Course in the Philippines: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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ABSTRACT

As of 2021, there were 6.4 million international students globally, with Chinese students making up the largest group of international students in the Philippines. This study investigated the lived experiences of Chinese undergraduate international students who took the compulsory Life and Works of the Rizal Course in the General Education Curriculum. The study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) with six Chinese undergraduate students. The research findings indicated that Chinese international students recognized the significance of the active participation of local students and a comprehensive cultural environment. In addition, it highlights how Chinese students draw on their cultural heritage and Rizal's ancestry to gain a deeper understanding of Rizal's life and work. Students faced challenges, such as language barriers, difficulties with online learning, and a lack of cultural background in the Philippines. Using the ABCs of acculturation theory, the results provide valuable insights into improving students' experiences in the Rizal course.

Keywords: Chinese International Student, Life and Works of Rizal Course, acculturation, Curriculum, Philippines, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Higher Education

In the age of globalization and the quest for international league tables, international students play an essential role in enhancing universities' internationalization in higher education (Shields, 2013). According to recent data from 2021, there are approximately 6.4 million international students worldwide. China has the highest number of international students (1,021,303). India closely follows 508,174 students, Vietnam has 137,022, Germany has 126,359, and Uzbekistan has 109,945 (UNESCO, 2023). Given the increasing number of international students, universities must confront the obstacles they encounter. A review of papers spanning 2002 to 2022 shows that most international students' studies were concentrated in countries of the global north, specifically the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada (Oduwaye et al., 2023).

Some experts contend that research on international students has approached them from both psychological and cognitive developmental perspectives. However, they argued that a new paradigm shift is needed for a critical, deconstructive, and constructive post-structural view. This new approach emphasizes transformative change, which reflects global inequality (Liu & Lin, 2024). Some propose the idea of a global curriculum that incorporates the values, culture, and philosophy that have shaped the experiences of international students (Munna, 2022). Universities capitalize on international education as a new neoliberal strategy that demands universities, academics, and governments to enhance international students' experiences and retention rates (Ammigan & Jones, 2018). Moreover, scholars have observed that most international student studies focus on the Global North (Liu & Lin, 2024; Oduwaye et al., 2023). This study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of Chinese undergraduate international students who attended the compulsory Life and Works of Rizal Course in the General Education Curriculum in the Philippines. It specifically explored the learning experiences, perceptions, and challenges they encountered.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Comparative Studies of International Students' Experiences in the Global North

A study in Ireland found that Chinese international students commonly used coping strategies, such as expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal, to adapt to a new environment (Sun & Nolan, 2021). During the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States, Chinese international students experienced heightened concern and fear due to incidents of Sinophobia and other related factors (Nam et al., 2023). A survey conducted by Chinese international students in Japan and the United States about their cross-cultural adaptation revealed that Chinese international students indicated that students relied on emotional support from people in their home country, resulting in a lower level of psychological adaptation (Zheng & Ishii, 2023). Chinese international students play a significant role in the neoliberal approach to international education in both New Zealand

and the United Kingdom (Yu et al., 2023; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Thus, universities must prioritize supporting international students.

Comparative Studies of International Students' Experiences in the Global South

International students face various challenges and implement diverse strategies to adjust to their academic experiences in southeast Asian countries. Diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds frequently present considerable challenges, which can influence social integration and academic success. In Malaysia, students report similar challenges related to language proficiency and cultural differences (Malekian et al., 2017). Adapting to variations in educational frameworks and scholarly standards is challenging. Korean students in Malaysia adapted their literacy practices to fit the local academic culture, whereas Iranian students encountered challenges, such as inadequate language skills and minimal engagement with the faculty (Nambiar et al., 2012). International students in southeast Asia encounter numerous challenges, yet a range of coping strategies to adapt successfully to the new environment (Santillan et al., 2018). Moreover, Chinese students increasingly choose to pursue their studies in Global South countries such as Chile to set themselves apart academically and take advantage of strategic opportunities that may benefit their future careers (Bórquez Basález et al., 2024). Important elements affecting their choice include the cost of education, the standard of teaching materials, and perceived security in these locations (Jiang et al., 2022). Nonetheless, numerous Chinese students pursuing their studies in Global South countries encounter difficulties, including perceived discrimination, loneliness, and social isolation (Jiang et al., 2022; Wong & Hyde, 2024).

The Context of International Students in the Philippines

According to the latest data from the Philippine Commission on Higher Education (CHED, 2019), there are 246 state universities and 1729 private universities in the Philippines. Researchers have observed that the educational system in the Philippines adheres to the neoliberal paradigm (Ruiz, 2014; Sannadan & Langay, 2021). Nevertheless, owing to the implementation of the free tuition tertiary education law for public universities and colleges (Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act, 2017), private universities and colleges are experiencing a decline in enrollment rates (Bayudan-Dacuycuy et al., 2023), resulting in a shift in attracting international student enrollees to fulfill the needs of the institutions. Moreover, according to the data provided by the Bureau of Immigration (2023), as shown in Figure 1, there has been a slight decrease in the number of international students in the Philippines from 2019 to 2021, followed by an increase from 2022 to 2023. Ortega (2018) suggests that the colonial legacy of the Philippines has influenced the reputation of its higher education system, making it an appealing destination for international students. Recently, the Philippines implemented a new law to attract international students to participate in the

internationalization process (Republic Act 11448, 2019). Additionally, the Philippines' quality education, enhanced by migration and the colonial past, attracts international students because of its low tuition fees and use of English as a medium of instruction in higher education (Killingley & Ilieva, 2015; Ortega, 2018).

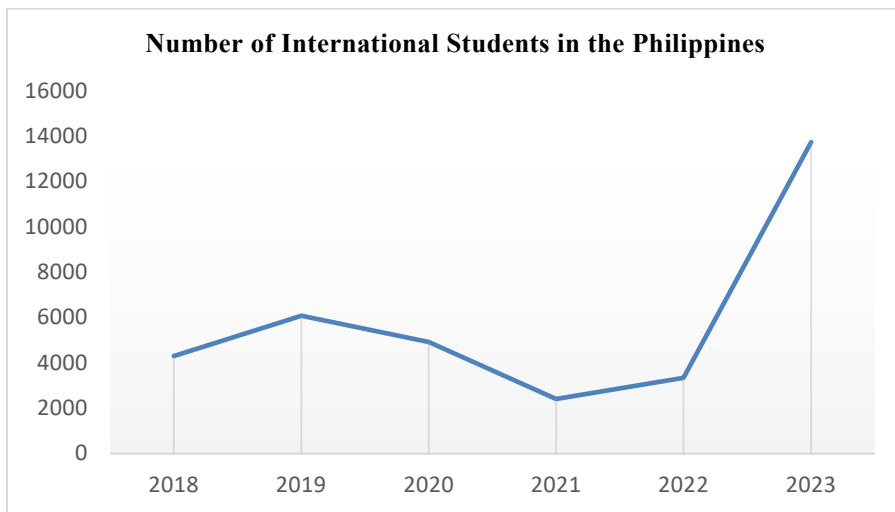


Figure 1. Number of International Students between 2018 and 2023

Note: Raw data are published in the Freedom of Information provided by the Bureau of Immigration.

Dr. Jose Rizal and Relevance to Chinese International Students

Dr. José Protasio Rizal Mercado y Alonso Realonda played a crucial role in the country's fight for independence from Spanish colonial rule, which lasted 333 years (Crudo et al., 2022). He was regarded as a national hero in the Philippines. Dr. Jose Rizal has diverse talents and interests, including writing, poetry, and social reform advocacy. His contributions have had a lasting impact on Philippine society and culture, even today (Nery, 2011). He is widely recognized as a leading southeast Asian figure who fought against colonial powers (Ikehata, 1968; Nery, 2011). He was known for his well-known books, including 'The Social Cancer' (Noli Me Tángere) in 1887 and 'The Reign of Greed' (El Filibusterismo) in 1891. The Noli Me Tángere, interpreted as Touch Me Not in English, sheds light on the social issues, inequality, and injustices faced by Filipino people under Spanish colonial rule (Rizal, 2022). Rizal's educational journey took him to Spain, where he studied as an international student; at that time, the Philippines was under Spanish rule (Zaide & Zaide, 2014). His paternal ancestor, Domingo Lamco (Cua Yi-Lam), originated in China and was added to his Chinese heritage. He was seen as a 'mestizo,' someone with a blend of native and foreign heritage, and an

'*ilustrado*,' a privileged and educated individual during that era (Chu, 2002). Understanding Rizal's life and work is essential to the Philippines' national identity, and many Filipinos feel a sense of responsibility for delving into this story. Moreover, a monument of Rizal was constructed in Jinjiang City, Quanzhou, Fujian Province, China, as a tribute to his Chinese heritage and as a symbol of China-Philippines relations (Inquirer, 2023; Servidad & Purigay, 2023).

Life and Works of Rizal Course and the Law

The Philippine higher education system organizes academic programs into two main curriculum components: the General Education Curriculum and the Professional Education Curriculum, also known as the Curriculum for Specialized Education (Asio et al., 2022). General education was required for all students, regardless of their major. The Rizal Law (RA 1425) was approved on June 12, 1956. It mandates that all public and private schools, colleges, and universities include courses on the life, work, and writing of Jose Rizal in their curricula. As per the law, the Rizal course is deemed a vital and motivating factor in instilling patriotism in the minds of youth, particularly during their crucial and developmental years in school (RA 1425, 1956). In 1994, after receiving reports of unsatisfactory implementation of the Rizal Law, President Fidel V. Ramos took action by directing the Department of Education, Culture and Sports (DECS) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) to ensure full compliance with the law through Memorandum Order 247 (Memorandum Order (MO) No. 247, 1994). In 1995, a memorandum was issued requesting all schools to comply with MO 247 (Valisno, 1995). Understanding Philippine history, culture, and society is a crucial aspect of the Rizal course mandated by Rizal Law and integrated into the General Education Curriculum (GEC). This course played a significant role in shaping Filipino students' knowledge and perspectives. It is worth noting that the Rizal course remains the only required course within the GEC, meaning that all students, including international students, are not eligible for exemption.

Theoretical Underpinning

Cultural adaptation is an intricate process of assimilation into a new culture that encompasses many elements, including personal experiences, familial circumstances, and community circumstances, and can profoundly affect well-being (Castro & Murray, 2010). The theory of Acculturation and Adaptation has gained popularity in Berry's works. In this theory, culture and individual development are crucial factors in adjusting to a new environment. In addition, the theory proposes four strategies for adjusting to a new environment: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization (Berry, 1997). Berry's theory has expanded the scope of acculturation theory by introducing the ABCs of acculturation theory—*affective*, *behavioral*, and *cognitive* acculturation suggested by researchers such as Ward and Szabó (2019). Several empirical

studies have examined Berry's acculturation theory concerning international students' experiences (Mahmood & Galloway Burke, 2018; Zheng & Ishii, 2023; Zhou et al., 2008).

The Research Context

In a study conducted in the Philippines, Wa-Mbaleka and Gaikwad (2013) found that international students faced challenges adapting to their new environment, possibly because of discrimination based on race and English-language proficiency. They also highlighted the challenges of searching for a new house and the difficulties associated with financial transactions. Recent research has investigated factors linked to depressive symptoms among international students. Furthermore, researchers have observed that language learning poses a significant challenge for international students studying in the Philippines (Ancheta, 2022; Ancheta & Perez, 2016).

METHOD

This study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to examine the lived experiences of international students in the *Life and Works of the Rizal* course. IPA is a research methodology that stems from phenomenology and aims to delve into significant lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022). One of the advantages of using IPA is its small, homogenous sample (Smith et al., 2022), which has six participants and all Chinese international students.

Participants and data collection

This study recruited Chinese international undergraduate students from Mainland China who had taken the *Life and Works of Rizal* course at universities in Manila to be the research participants of the study. In order to recruit additional participants or informants, we used snowball sampling, a method for searching for participants of the study by seeking recommendations from an initial participant for additional interviewees (Babbie, 2013; Spinelli, 2006) and looking for those who “have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched” (Kruger and Stones, 1989, p. 150).

On average, all the participants were 20–32 years old (Table 1). Three males, three females, and three of the six international students had recently graduated from university, and the remaining three were still enrolled. Six international students majored in music and art education, mathematics, early childhood education, computer technology, business administration, and the communication arts. Four participants noted that they were learning the *Life and Works of the Rizal* course face-to-face, whereas the other two studied remotely. Regarding the year in which they enrolled in the course, only two were enrolled during the COVID-19 pandemic. The remaining students were enrolled in 2016, 2018, 2019, and 2023, respectively.

Table 1. Demographic Data of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Major	Experience Before Enrollment	Course Time	Mode of Course Delivery
S1	Female	28-31	Music and Art Education	Lived and worked in the Philippines for 3 years before enrollment.	2016	onsite
S2	Male	24-27	Mathematics	International student	2018	onsite
S3	Female	28-31	Early Childhood Education	Lived and worked in the Philippines for 2 years before enrollment	2019	onsite
S4	Male	24-27	Computer Technology	International student	2020	online
S5	Female	20-23	Business Administration	International student	2021	online
S6	Male	20-23	Arts in Communication	International student	2023	Onsite

Data Collection and Analysis

This study was conducted through semi-structured interviews. Chinese and English language experts were recruited to ensure the interview questionnaires were valid and reliable. Moreover, the data for the study were collected using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) technique. Open-ended discourse allows participants to share relevant information and experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data were collected between April and July 2020, with four participants interviewed in person and two through online video interviews. Three participants, however, declined to be recorded and instead asked that their responses be written based on the interview. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was recorded using a digital recorder capable of capturing audio and transcribing it word-by-word. The interviewers and interviewees communicated in Chinese using translation software to convert the conversation into English. After the interviews, the transcripts were given to the interviewees in written format, and their corrections and confirmation were requested for

member checking to ensure trustworthiness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thematic analysis was conducted using the six-step approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was conducted by coding the following six phases: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a final report (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

The researchers ensured that all participants consented before participating in the study. Participants were given comprehensive information regarding the research purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study without penalties or consequences. The study strictly adhered to all participants' confidentiality and privacy requirements. The interviews were conducted in private settings selected by the participants to prioritize their comfort and privacy. All collected data were handled with utmost confidentiality and stored securely. All names were anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

RESULTS

This study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of six Chinese undergraduate international students who attended the compulsory Life and Works of Rizal Course in the General Education Curriculum (GEC).

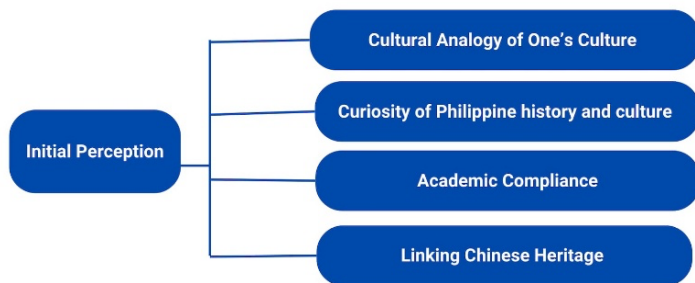


Figure 2. Initial Perception of Chinese International Students Prior to the Course

Note. Authors' own work

Figure 2 shows the summary of themes of the initial perception of Chinese international students before attending the course.

Perceptions of Chinese International Students Towards the Rizal Course

Cultural Analogy of One's Culture. Chinese international students compared Dr. Jose Rizal with Sun Yat-sen, a famous historical figure in China. Participants used analogies from their prior knowledge to understand the cultural significance of studying the Rizal course. It is worth noting that the participants even considered visiting the National Museum to learn more about Dr. Jose Rizal. Moreover, students with limited exposure to living in the Philippines and lacking prior knowledge of the subject had a superficial understanding of the Rizal Course. One participant stated,

“Before taking this course, I really did not know about Rizal, and I did not take the initiative to learn about it. I think it is mainly because I am a science student, and usually, I do not pay special attention to history and culture. After I came to the Philippines, I went to the National Museum once, and there was a room about Rizal, and I think I saw his sculptures and things like that. At that time, I regarded him as Sun Yat-sen (known as the father of the nation in China.” (S2)

Curiosity of Philippine history and culture. The participants expressed an interest in learning about Philippine culture and history through their study of the Rizal Course. They were informed in advance that the Rizal course was compulsory for all students regardless of nationality. Chinese international students were notified of this requirement during their admissions. The participants' curiosity and motivation drove them to deepen their knowledge of the Philippine culture and history. One of the participants, S6, remarked,

“Because I know there is this Rizal course, or compulsory, to get credit, I was motivated to learn about Rizal and the history and culture of the Philippines. Before taking this course, I really didn't pay attention to the course or the person. It was only during the class that I learned that the man commemorated in Rizal Park was him.” (S6)

Academic Compliance. Some participants viewed attending the Rizal course as merely a requirement for credit or compliance with the curriculum. However, they noted that the lack of available materials for learning about Rizal contributed to their lack of understanding of the course. Despite this, participants were still motivated to enroll in the course because of their academic incentives to earn credit. One Chinese international student commented on the matter.

“When I applied to college, I learned about the curriculum plan of the school, and I had an impression of the Rizal course in the general studies program. I know it's compulsory. My wish is not to fail the course. However, there are not many books and videos about Rizal that can be seen in China, and I did not pay special attention to them. I didn't think I would come to the Philippines to study, so when I came, I knew nothing about the history and culture of the Philippines” (S5)

Linking Chinese Heritage. Chinese students' interest in the Rizal course continues to grow as the course progresses because of its content and multifaceted background, which piques their curiosity, especially regarding Chinese heritage. Rizal's Chinese heritage, remarkable achievements, romantic pursuits, and diverse talents collectively contribute to the allure of the Rizal course. It was also noted that Chinese students thought Filipino people lacked unity to fight against the colonizer. Moreover, the life and work of the Jose Rizal course helped Chinese students understand Rizal's relationship with his paternal ancestor as an immigrant from China and Rizal's contribution to Philippine independence. S3 shared:

“However, in the course of learning, I learned a lot and thought more deeply. For example, when I learned that Rizal's ancestors were Chinese immigrants, I was very excited and became interested in his family history. In addition, Rizal's versatility as a writer, social activist, artist, and involved in philosophy and sociology aroused my strong interest in Chinese family education at that time. For Chinese students like me, this course provides us with a lot of fresh perspectives. I think some previous understandings are rather superficial; for example, I thought they lacked the national spirit to resist the colonists. This course has benefited me a lot. Today, I am able to live and work in the Philippines, and I believe this course has helped me a lot.” (S3)

Chinese International Students' Learning Experience

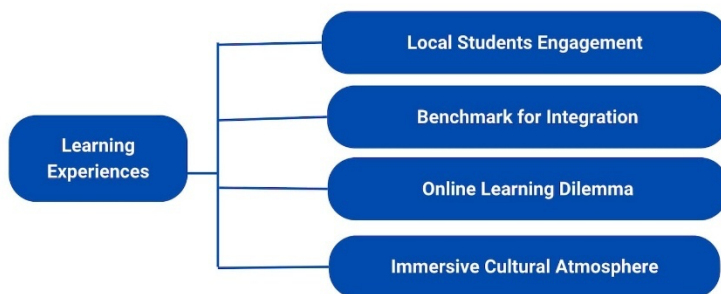


Figure 3. Learning Experience in Attending Rizal Course

Note. Authors' own work

Figure 3 shows a summary of themes regarding the students' learning experiences studying the compulsory Rizal course.

Local Student Engagement. The participants highlighted that engaging with Filipino students is crucial for understanding the Rizal course. Chinese international students study with domestic students. Engagement is a good way to

foster understanding, such as discussions on social media, where all members of the university have the chance to engage with each other, allowing participants to gain more information about Rizal. This helps them understand why Rizal has a monument that is used to name the street after him. Chinese students observed cultural practices, explored historical sites, and engaged with the local residents. One participant was eloquently described.

“After coming to the Philippines, I found many elements of Rizal here (such as the block named after him and Rizal Park.) The school also had some discussions about him on Facebook and with my classmates. I began to understand this course more deeply and used memorization to understand Philippine culture. Because, after all, you will study and live in the Philippines, it is always good to have more opportunities to learn about their history and culture with peers.” (S5)

Benchmark for Integration. Some Chinese students admitted that they had limited knowledge of Dr. Jose Rizal. Participants expressed that understanding the Rizal course greatly facilitated their integration into Filipino society. Studying Rizal's life and work does not primarily aim at promoting nationalism or history. It also assists Chinese international students in integrating and understanding Filipino culture. Moreover, participants shared how they shifted their use of social media from WeChat to Facebook to read Philippine news. These practices helped them develop a stronger sense of belonging and boosted their confidence. Inclusion within the cultural milieu enables international students to interact actively with local residents. Such interactions foster meaningful discussions, broaden perspectives, and cultivate a profound appreciation for Philippine culture. A participant shared:

“In addition, I have increased my extracurricular integration with Filipino society and communication with Filipinos about Rizal. I read Philippine news every day. I think these are helpful and at least make me more confident to fit in.” (S6)

Online Learning Dilemma. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many higher education institutions in the Philippines have resorted to distance learning online to ensure the continuity of learning. Of the six participants, two completed the Rizal course online while residing in China. However, they expressed dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of their online learning experiences, attributing their discontent to the absence of a cultural atmosphere. S4 says:

“My course is online. I think the biggest challenge is the lack of atmosphere in distance learning due to the pandemic. When I am not in the cultural environment of the Philippines and my English is not good enough, and when the effect of teachers' instruction is often affected by the Internet, the course effect is relatively poor. At that time, I didn't know how to solve

the problem. It wasn't until last year, when offline teaching resumed, that I returned to Manila again. I felt that what I had learned about Rizal in the course had deepened since my return to Manila, especially when I saw his statue, the park named after him, and the museum's exhibition about Rizal. This is especially true when I meet face-to-face with my Filipino classmates to discuss their history, culture, and values.” (S4)

Immersive Cultural Atmospheres. Notably, all the participants recounted their encounters with significant landmarks in the Philippines. The participants expressed that visiting these places was their top priority upon arrival in the Philippines. This helps them to understand the country’s history and culture. To increase their knowledge of Rizal, the participants attended an exhibition related to Dr. Jose Rizal and visited Rizal Park and the National Museum. Participants believed that students should have an immersive cultural environment to interact with locals, observe culture, gain a deeper understanding of Filipino history, and learn the Filipino language and values. One participant said,

“When I arrived in the Philippines, especially Manila, there were Rizal statues, parks, museums, and even a university called Rizal. (I didn't come to the Philippines until 2022 because of the pandemic). This often reminds me of something I've learned in previous online courses. I think only when you really come to the Philippines can you learn the Rizal course well and really understand the country and its people.” (S5)

Challenges Faced by Chinese International Students in Rizal Course



Figure 4. Challenges Faced by the Chinese International Students

Note. Authors’ own work

Figure 4 presents a summary of the themes and challenges encountered by the students in taking the Rizal course.

Language Barriers. For Chinese international students, English is considered to be a foreign language. Initially, all interviewees displayed strong enthusiasm for the Rizal Course. However, they quickly realized the challenges of learning the subject because of their limited English proficiency. Although students demonstrated English proficiency during admission, they faced challenges when learning Rizal content in an academic setting. Furthermore,

Chinese students face cultural barriers as a result of language barriers, which hinder their understanding. They also mentioned coming across words like "*mestizo*" and "*Ilustrado*," to name a few, while studying the course, which originated from Spanish. One participant noted the following.

“I think that language and learning adaptation are the main barriers; they are solved, but the cultural differences are not the problem. For example, if my English is good enough, I can watch a lot of videos and books, and I can communicate freely with my classmates. Naturally, I will understand the Philippine culture.” (S2)

Lack of Cultural Knowledge. Chinese students noted that most Filipino classmates were familiar with Rizal. The participants believed that having prior knowledge of the course enhanced their ability to engage in class discussion. However, they noted having limited knowledge of Philippine history and culture, particularly regarding the Rizal Course. Chinese international students discussed the challenges they faced in keeping up with their local peers, often spending a significant amount of time reading the materials. A participant shares:

“However, I think the course is a little difficult for international students; we do not know much about the colonial history of the Philippines, and we need to spend a lot of time outside the classroom reading some supplementary materials. This course helped me understand the history and culture of the Philippines, and my oral English expression improved accordingly.” (S6)

Academic Adaptation. It is worth noting that academic adaptation poses a challenge for Chinese international students. All participants completed their basic education in China and pursued a bachelor's degree in the Philippines. Adapting to the academic environment can be challenging, particularly when English is used as a medium for instruction. Chinese international students were unfamiliar with the teaching methods employed by the teachers as they were more focused on student engagement and participation. The participants reflected on variations in learning dynamics within the classroom, such as being expressive of their thoughts during discussions and taking charge of their presentations. The students also observed that their Rizal teachers were crucial in facilitating and motivating them to take charge of their learning. Furthermore, the students were taken aback by the teachers' approach, which allowed them to conduct surveys, collaborate with their peers, and evaluate each other. One participant stated the following.

“The language was definitely a problem, but I think what was even more difficult was that I was not accustomed to learning in a way that I had not experienced before. After every lecture, the teacher invited everyone to give their opinions, which made me feel very pressured. I was also surprised by my personal presentation. What's more, the teacher encouraged us to study actively and independently, such as participating in Rizal-related social

activities, doing questionnaires, working in groups, and taking them as the assessment content, which surprised me.” (S2)

The participants were astonished by the teaching methods used by Filipino educators. Chinese international students share their experiences in Chinese classrooms, where the discussion of Chinese national heroes is approached with utmost respect, and criticism is not encouraged. During the Rizal course, participants were surprised when the teacher organized a debate activity in which students had to present arguments for and against Rizal as a national hero. Chinese international students may have felt uneasy participating in classroom discussions, posing questions, and engaging in critical debates, mainly when the topic revolved around national heroes. S6 noted:

“.....they often had some tit-for-tat arguments and countercriticisms of what the teacher was teaching, which shocked me. Because in China, this kind of curriculum about national heroes rarely combines reality, let alone opposes the teacher's views. I remember that during the group discussion, one Filipino student made it clear that he objected to being considered a national hero by Rizal and that his contribution was limited. Then, another student contradicted him.” (S6)

DISCUSSION

The study interviewed six Chinese undergraduate students using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). It investigates the lived experiences of studying the life and work of the Rizal Course.

Affective Acculturation. In the acculturation theory, affective acculturation examines emotional changes as a person adapts to a new culture. It discusses various aspects of emotional well-being, such as stress, anxiety, and satisfaction, which are influenced by factors such as cultural distance, social support, and discrimination (Sam & Berry, 2010; Ward & Szabó, 2019). According to the study findings, Chinese international students faced challenges with online learning and experienced emotional difficulties due to language and cultural differences, particularly when studying the Rizal Course. Several studies have indicated that Chinese students experience feelings of discrimination, especially during the COVID-19 online learning experience (Nam et al., 2023), as well as increased levels of anxiety and stress (English et al., 2022; Su et al., 2021). The experience of Chinese international students in the Philippines with the Filipino teaching method is similar to that of other Chinese students studying in the United States, who face a cultural shock when adjusting to academic culture (Fox, 2020) and different classroom practices (Rawlings & Sue, 2013).

Behavioral Acculturation. Within this facet of acculturation theory, behavior focuses on action changes that result from assimilation into a new culture. It emphasizes shifts in language usage, communication styles, interactions, etc. This

has affected cultural norms, values, and beliefs in the new environment (Sam & Berry, 2010; Ward & Szabó, 2019). This finding indicates that language barriers and engagement with classmates are essential to successful integration into new cultures. It is worth noting that these barriers are frequently encountered by individuals who are non-native English speakers (Ancheta & Perez, 2016; Rawlings & Sue, 2013; Scally & Jiang, 2020).

Cognitive Acculturation. This dimension focuses on shifts in perspectives, convictions, and principles. Throughout cognitive adaptation, individuals are shaped by various elements, including cultural identity, cultural knowledge, and intercultural competence (Sam & Berry, 2010; Ward & Szabó, 2019). According to the findings, Chinese students have a limited understanding of the Filipino culture. They can better adapt to their new academic environment by drawing on their own experiences and establishing connections between their Chinese background and the heritage of Rizal. In a study conducted by Kim (2001), international students underwent a process of cross-cultural adaptation encompassing three essential areas: academic, sociocultural, and psychological.

Implication for Practice and Limitation of the Study

The findings emphasize the impact of enhancing the Philippine international education curriculum, particularly in the context of internationalization. The recommendations for educators and higher education institutions that handle Chinese international students are as follows.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) must consider tailoring curriculum programs to international standards. HEIs should consider providing all international students with a compulsory English language course as a foundational course before undertaking major courses. Alternatively, educators may consider using Artificial Intelligence (AI) or technology to mitigate language barriers among international students. In addition, international students might have a different curriculum from that of local students in order to meet overseas demands. For instance, in the Philippine context, some curriculum courses are patterned guidelines from the Philippine Regulation Commission as requirements for licensure examinations.

Educational institutions need to recognize the value of this immersive cultural learning approach and encourage international students to actively engage with the local culture to maximize their academic pursuits. It is suggested that universities train all Rizal course teachers to teach students from diverse cultural backgrounds effectively. Teachers play a crucial role in helping students adapt to new environments by promoting sensitivity and cultural awareness.

Student Affairs Services or the International Students Office of each HEI may consider out-of-campus tours to historical places related to Dr. Jose Rizal to help students become familiar with the culture and society. In addition, HEIs may consider academic support services that focus on international students' academic adjustment to help them transition to university education.

Limitation of the Study

Recognizing the limitations of this study is crucial. These findings may not be generalizable to all international student groups because of the small number of participants involved in the study. Additionally, the study's emphasis on students who took the Rizal course may have limited the inclusion of the perspectives of those who did not participate. Future research should investigate this matter, specifically in the Philippine context, considering that most studies have been conducted in the global north. Future studies should explore the role of cultural adaptation in the context of the Global South.

Conclusion

This study investigated the lived experiences of Chinese undergraduate international students who completed the compulsory life and work of the Rizal Course of the General Education Curriculum. The findings revealed that Chinese international students initially viewed the Rizal course through the lens of a cultural analogy, comparing it to Sun Yat-sen in China. Students' learning experiences were enriched through engagement with local peers and cultural immersion at historical landmarks, which deepened their understanding of Rizal and Filipino culture. However, online learning during the pandemic has a limited cultural context, highlighting the importance of an immersive learning environment. Moreover, Chinese international students face language barriers, cultural knowledge gaps, and difficulties adapting to interactive and debate-driven Filipino teaching styles. This study had some limitations owing to its limited sample size. Future research should explore the role of cultural adaptation in the context of the Global South. Moreover, this study cannot be generalized to all international students in the Philippines. Nonetheless, this study contributes to the literature on Chinese international students in a non-western context.

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