

COPING WITH TEST ANXIETY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THAI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH THE HSK EXAM FROM A SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE*

Yuanai Li¹ and Warisa Asavaratana²

¹⁻²Department of Eastern Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University,
Thailand

Corresponding Author's Email: warisa.as@ku.th

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Abstract

Under the background of globalization, HSK is becoming more and more important in Thailand. HSK has become the key to study abroad and employment, but it also brings test anxiety challenges. This study uses the phenomenological method to explore the anxiety experience of Thai university students in HSK examination from the perspective of social and cultural theory. In the form of in-depth interviews, 16 university students from 10 different universities were interviewed. The results show that their anxiety is diverse and closely related to social and cultural background. Based on this, the study puts forward targeted suggestions to provide support and strategies for Thai students' HSK preparation.

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Introduction

In the 21st century, the accelerating pace of globalization, coupled with China's rising comprehensive national power, has positioned Chinese language education as a subject of global significance. Thailand exemplifies the successful development of Chinese education, serving as a notable model not only within Asia but also for other regions. A cornerstone of this educational landscape is the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK), which has become a pivotal metric for assessing the Chinese proficiency of Thai learners.

Despite these achievements, a critical gap persists in understanding the lived experiences of Thai university students navigating the HSK examination. While the test's importance is widely acknowledged, there is a scarcity of in-depth, systematic inquiry into the psychological challenges it presents, particularly test anxiety, and the underlying socio-cultural dimensions that shape this phenomenon. Current literature often lacks a focused analysis of the specific manifestations of anxiety throughout the preparation and testing phases, the coping strategies students employ, and, crucially, how their socio-cultural background informs these experiences.

To address this gap, this study adopts a phenomenological approach, framed within socio-cultural theory, to explore the essence of Thai university students' HSK test anxiety. Moving beyond mere description, this research aims to analytically uncover the socio-cultural factors embedded within their anxiety narratives. The findings are expected to serve a dual purpose: firstly, to offer targeted psychological support and culturally adaptive strategies for Thai HSK candidates, thereby enriching the field of language test anxiety research; and

secondly, to provide theoretical insights and practical guidance for the ongoing refinement of Chinese language pedagogy and assessment in Thailand.

Objectives

The research objectives of this study are as follows:

1. In order to study the anxiety performance and coping strategies of Thai University students in HSK examination.
2. In order to study the social and cultural factors behind the HSK test anxiety experience of Thai University students.

Literature Review

1. Chinese Test Anxiety and Its Impact

Test anxiety is recognized as a significant form of “academic anxiety” in educational contexts by Cassady (2010). It is conceptually defined as an unpleasant state characterized by tension, apprehension, worrisome thoughts, and autonomic nervous system activation when facing evaluative situations, Spielberger(1972). According to the Self-Referent Executive Processing (S-REF) model, test anxiety arises from executive regulatory processes that deal with evaluative threats and is sustained through maladaptive behaviors such as procrastination or avoidance of practice (Putwain, 2019; Zeidner & Matthews, 2005). These mechanisms lead to negative outcomes including attentional shifts, failure to apply study skills effectively, intrusive thoughts, and loss of motivation.

Test anxiety is widely understood to comprise two key dimensions: worry and emotionality (Zeidner, 2014). Worry, the cognitive component, involves concerns about being evaluated, fear of failure, and the consequences of poor performance (Cassady, 2010; Sarason, 1984; Zeidner, 2014). Emotionality, the affective-physiological component, encompasses perceived

autonomic reactions such as increased heart rate and tension (Sarason, 1984; Zeidner, 2014). Sarason (1984) notably highlighted that test anxiety can trigger both physiological and psychological reactions-such as accelerated heartbeat and inattention-which impair response speed and accuracy and may even lead to avoidance behaviors, thereby significantly impacting test performance.

Emerging research has begun to explore these dynamics in the context of Chinese language testing. For example, Bao Huan (2014) found that anxiety among American university students learning Chinese was not significantly related to gender or grade level, but was associated with length of study and academic major, with test difficulty and examination environment identified as common anxiety triggers. Similarly, a study by Zanabuguli Abulizi (2021) on Xinjiang international students indicated that anxiety surrounding the HSK Level 6 was prevalent and linked to learning duration and discipline type, underscoring the need for interventions aimed at improving the testing environment.

While these studies provide valuable initial insights, there remains a limited engagement with broader, contemporary theoretical frameworks of test anxiety, particularly from a cross-cultural perspective. Current literature on Chinese test anxiety lacks sufficient integration of recent socioculturally-grounded anxiety research (post-2018). Furthermore, the distinct sociocultural and educational circumstances of Thai university students-a population for whom the HSK carries significant academic and professional weight-have not been thoroughly investigated through a phenomenological lens that accounts for the interplay between cognitive-affective dimensions of anxiety and their unique cultural context.

2. The research status of HSK examination in Thailand

Zhang Jiaying (2021) pointed out that the relevant research in Thailand mostly focused on HSK error analysis, textbook comparison and examination form comparison, and lacked in-depth discussion on test anxiety. Zhang Ruifang

and Yang Yisheng (2014) confirmed that Chinese learning anxiety was negatively correlated with HSK scores, but did not focus on highly educated learners in a non-target language environment.

The existing research rarely examines the HSK test experience of Thai university students from the perspective of sociocultural theory, especially lacks a phenomenological analysis of the anxiety generation mechanism in a non-target language environment, and it is urgent to conduct interdisciplinary exploration in combination with sociocultural theory.

3. The combination of sociocultural theory and phenomenological method

Vygotsky (1978) proposed that cognitive development is achieved through social interaction mediated by cultural tools, and his 'zone of proximal development' theory reveals that test tasks may cause anxiety when they exceed individual abilities. Engeström (2014)'s activity system theory further points out that the contradiction between test rules and real language practice may aggravate emotional reactions.

The phenomenology of Husserl (2006) emphasizes the intuition and reflection of subjective experience. Combined with social and cultural theory, it can deeply reveal the anxiety experience and social and cultural roots of Thai examinees in HSK examination, and provide a new perspective for teaching practice.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore the anxiety experience of Thai university students in HSK examination, using qualitative research paradigm, taking phenomenological method as the core, and integrating the analysis perspective of social and cultural theory.

1. Phenomenological research method

The phenomenological research method is a qualitative research method. Its philosophical foundation originates from Husserl and others, emphasizing the return to the thing itself, through the in-depth description and reflection of individual life experience, to reveal the essential structure and significance of the phenomenon (Husserl, 2015). This study uses semi-structured interviews to collect the HSK test experience of Thai university students, and analyzes the text according to the phenomenological steps to reveal the deep structure and common essence of their anxiety experience.

2. An analytical framework of sociocultural theory

The sociocultural theory was proposed by Vygotsky (1978), emphasizing that the development of advanced psychological functions stems from intermediary activities in social and cultural contexts. The theory holds that cognition and emotion do not exist in isolation, but are formed and developed through cultural tools (such as language and examination system), social interaction (such as teacher-student and peer interaction) and rules in specific activity systems.

This study uses the core concepts of social and cultural theory to analyze the shaping and mitigation mechanism of test requirements, cultural tools and social support systems on Thai university students' HSK test anxiety.

3. Conceptual Framework

This study uses phenomenological research methods to explore the anxiety experience of Thai university students when they participate in the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK). The phenomenological research method focuses on analyzing the individual's subjective experience, and comprehensively describes the anxiety state of Thai university students in the HSK test through in-depth interviews and other means. This study follows the principles of scientificity and rigor, and is divided into multiple steps such as determining research questions and design, designing interview outlines, sample

selection and research object determination, data collection and coding analysis, and summary to ensure the systematicness and effectiveness of the research. The specific research flow chart is as follows (Figure 1):

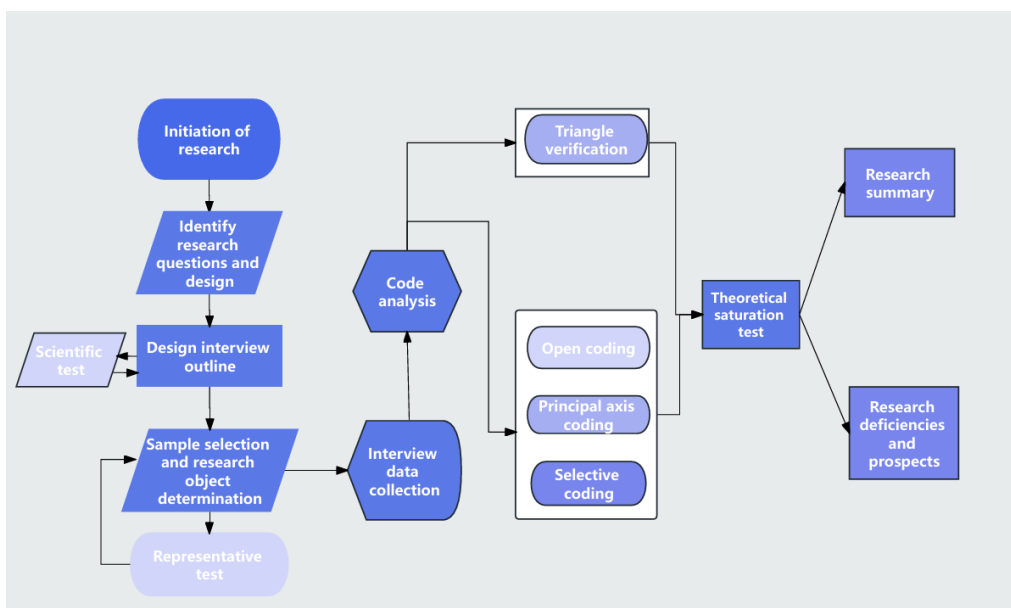


Figure 1 Research process chart (Source: Constructed by the researcher)

4. Participant Selection and Ethical Considerations

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to select 16 Thai university students (10 females, 6 males) who had taken the HSK Level 4 or above. Participants were primarily senior undergraduates from 12 different universities across Thailand (e.g., Chulalongkorn University, Chiang Mai University, Mahidol University), representing diverse academic disciplines including Chinese Language, International Business, and Hospitality Management. Selection criteria required participants to have self-reported significant HSK test anxiety and be willing to share their experiences in depth. Recruitment was conducted through university departments, HSK training

centers, and public advertisements to ensure diversity. The sample size was determined by data saturation.

Ethical rigor was maintained through informed consent procedures, ensuring participants understood the research purpose and their rights. Beyond anonymizing names, specific university affiliations are not disclosed in findings to prevent deductive disclosure, thus strengthening confidentiality. The researcher maintained reflexivity regarding their positionality throughout the process. While coding techniques were used for data management, the study's core methodology remains phenomenological, focused on elucidating the essential structures of the participants' lived experiences of test anxiety.

Results

1. Data Analysis Process

1.1 Data collation and preprocessing

In this study, interview data were collected by means of full recording to ensure the integrity and accuracy of information. In the data collation stage, the interview recordings are first transcribed verbatim into text. During the transcription process, special attention is paid to the non-verbal information such as the emotional changes and tone of the interviewees. These annotations provide important clues for subsequent analysis.

After the transcription is completed, the text data is systematically sorted out to eliminate the content that is less relevant to the research topic, such as chat topics, repetitive expressions, etc. At the same time, in order to protect the privacy of the respondents, anonymization measures are adopted, and the coding system is used to replace the real identity information, and the specific details that may expose the personal identity are hidden.

1.2 Data Analysis Process

This study employed a qualitative analysis approach, integrating a phenomenological perspective with grounded theory coding techniques, facilitated by NVivo 15 software. The analysis proceeded through three stages, with a constant focus on capturing the participants' lived experiences.

The process began with open coding, where we immersed ourselves in the interview transcripts to identify initial concepts. We approached the data openly, tagging every meaningful statement related to the participants' experiences. This resulted in 1,458 initial references. Through constant comparison, these were consolidated into 134 specific codes and further synthesized into 20 broader conceptual categories. For instance, statements like “my hands were shaking when I saw the writing question” were coded as “physiological reactions,” while concerns about “needing the HSK 5 certificate to get a good job in a Thai-Chinese company” were grouped under “career pressure.”

Subsequently, axial coding was conducted to connect these categories and explore their relationships. We moved beyond description to understand how different aspects of the experience interacted. Five main dimensions emerged from this analysis:

The Sociocultural Value of HSK: Anxiety was closely linked to the test's role as a form of symbolic capital. Participants viewed the certificate not just as a test result but as a crucial key to future opportunities, such as higher salaries and prestigious jobs, intensifying the stakes.

Learning as a Social Practice: Preparation was not an isolated activity but a socially embedded one. Pressure came from peers and family, while support was found in study groups. As one participant noted, “My friend passed HSK 5 first, which pushed me to study harder, but also made me more nervous.”

Navigating Systemic Challenges: Anxiety was often triggered by the institutional rules of the test itself, particularly the intense time pressure in the reading and writing sections, and the broader requirement of the certificate by Thai employers.

Finally, through selective coding, we identified the core narrative that integrates the entire analysis. The central story that emerged is one of “Navigating High-Stakes Cross-Cultural Identity.” For these Thai students, preparing for and taking the HSK was more than a simple academic task; it was a complex practice where personal ambition, family expectations, and career aspirations converged. The anxiety they experienced was the embodied essence of this high-stakes negotiation, where a test score became deeply intertwined with their evolving identity and future prospects in a globalized context.

Table 1 Visualization of coding process

Core coding	Spindle coding	Open coding example	Social and cultural theory relevance
The intermedia- ry transmission mechanism of symbolic capital	The learning interme-diary system in social practice	Examination resources support, teaching support, technical assistance, cultural infiltration	Intermediary tool theory, social practice community
	Social and cultural influence and pressure source	Family expectations, employment threshold, peer incentives	Cultural and historical activity theory, cognitive distribution theory
	Social structural drivers	Economic ties, education system,	Capital theory, institutional practice

		cultural capital	theory
The Regulating System of Intercultural Communities of Practice	Multidimensional representation of test anxiety	Physiological reaction, psychological state, behavior performance.	Body-mind interaction theory, situated cognition theory
	Individual test anxiety coping strategies	Psychological adjustment, resource integration, social support	Zone of Proximal Development Theory, Distributed Cognition Theory
The dynamic negotiation of cultural identity	The cultural construction of cognition and behavior	Career Development, Cultural Identity, Perfectionism	Instrumental motivation theory, cultural identity theory

Based on the above contents, we can conclude that these three characteristics form an explanatory closed loop: the symbolic capital system constructs the social value coordinates of the examination, the cross-cultural practice provides specific adjustment scenarios, and the cultural identity reveals the deep psychological motivation of the individual coping mechanism, which together constitute the explanatory model of HSK test anxiety from social structure restriction to individual active coping.

2. Theoretical Model Development

2.1 Construction of theoretical model

Building upon the core categories identified through selective coding, we propose a theoretical model to elucidate the social and cultural dynamics of HSK test anxiety among Thai university students. This model, termed the “Three-Layer Dynamics Model of Cross-Cultural Test Anxiety,” is structured

around three interconnected layers: the Symbolic Capital Structure, the Cross-Cultural Practice of Adjustment, and the Cultural Identity Dynamics.

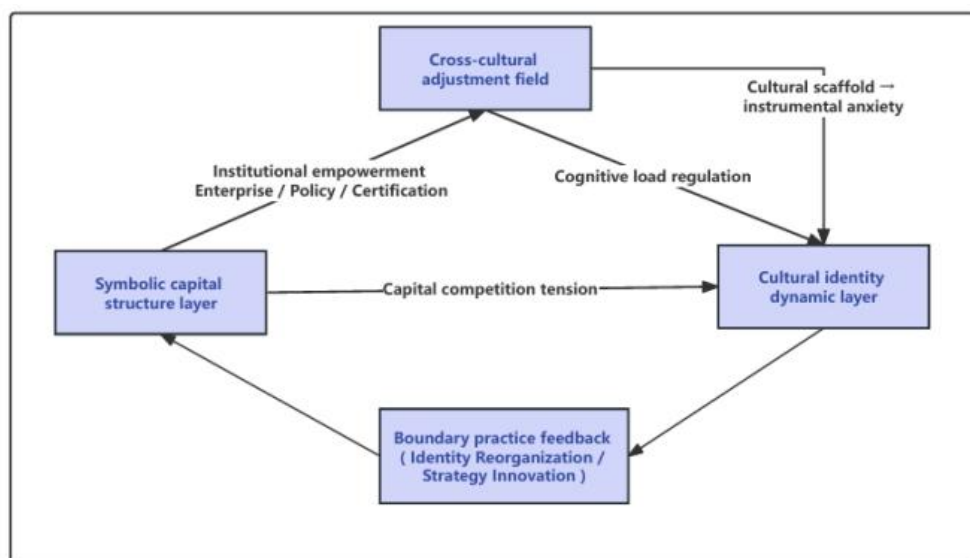


Figure 2 Theoretical model diagram (Source: Constructed by the researcher)

The model illustrates that test anxiety is not merely an individual psychological state but a manifestation of complex social forces. The dynamic process unfolds as follows:

1. The Symbolic Capital Structure Layer forms the foundation, where the HSK certificate is institutionally empowered as valuable “symbolic capital.” This is not an abstract concept but is experienced by students as intense pressure rooted in tangible goals. Empirical data reveals this as anxiety about future “career advancement” (e.g., “HSK is a ticket to a good job in a Sino-Thai company”), “academic opportunities” (e.g., “I need HSK 5 for a scholarship”), and meeting “family expectations”. This layer generates what we term “instrumental anxiety,” where the test is perceived as a critical gatekeeper to life opportunities.

2. This anxiety propels learners into the Cross-Cultural Practice of Adjustment Layer. Here, students are not passive victims but active agents

employing various strategies to navigate the demands of the test. This aligns with their reported practices of “cognitive load regulation” (e.g., creating strict study schedules to manage vast vocabulary), seeking “cultural scaffolding” (e.g., using Chinese media to build contextual understanding), and engaging in “boundary practice” (e.g., participating in online Chinese communities). These practices represent their creative and strategic responses to the pressure from the structural layer.

3. These ongoing practices, in turn, fuel the Cultural Identity Dynamics Layer. The process of preparing for and confronting the HSK exam forces a re-evaluation of the self in relation to Chinese culture. This goes beyond simple test performance, triggering a process of “identity negotiation.” For some, success enhances a sense of “cultural belonging” and competence. For others, struggle may lead to temporary “identity confusion.” The final outcome is often “strategy innovation” and a form of “identity reorganization,” where students develop a more complex, nuanced personal and professional identity that incorporates Chinese language skills as a core component.

In essence, the “anxiety” experienced by Thai students is the lived, emotional catalyst in this dynamic. It is the felt tension between the institutional value of the HSK certificate and their personal journey of cross-cultural learning and identity formation. This model posits that anxiety is not an endpoint but a transformative force within the cross-cultural educational experience.

2.2 Theoretical saturation test

This study follows the grounded theory methodology and constructs a ‘symbolic capital intermediary-cross-cultural practice community adjustment-cultural identity ternary dynamic model’ through three-level coding. In order to verify the theoretical saturation of the model, we conducted the following tests:

Model coverage verification: 15 % of the interview text is reserved as a test sample, and two rounds of cross-cycle coding analysis are performed. The results show that 98.6 % of the open coding in the original data is effectively covered, the correlation category remains stable, and the core category interpretation fissure rate is zero, reaching the theoretical saturation state.

The verification of the dynamic interaction mechanism: The continuous comparison method and the triangle verification method are used to construct the conditional matrix to analyze the typical interaction scenarios. It is found that the direction of the three dimensions is characterized by two-way feedback and is significantly adjusted by the cultural context. Data triangulation, method triangulation and researcher triangulation all verify the stability of the path. The time series analysis method identifies three types of co-construction trajectories and shows the dynamic evolution process of the three dimensions.

Negative case investigation: All interview materials were carefully screened and verified by the three-level coding system. No category contradiction or path fracture was found. Due to the institutional homogeneity of the research sample and the dynamic adjustment ability of the theoretical model, the explanatory closure of the theoretical model of this study has reached the saturation requirement.

3. Research Findings on HSK Test Anxiety

This section will briefly review the research background, purpose and significance, and elaborate on the content structure of this chapter, that is, research findings and specific recommendations based on these findings. The purpose of this study is to deeply understand the anxiety experience of Thai university students in HSK examination, identify the main factors affecting anxiety, and propose effective coping strategies through phenomenological research methods and social and cultural theory perspectives. Through these findings, we aim to provide practical suggestions for educators, students and

families in order to improve Thai students' Chinese learning and HSK test performance.

3.1 Thai university students' HSK test anxiety experience

Before in-depth discussion of the research findings, it is necessary to first outline the universality and specific performance of Thai university students' anxiety in the HSK examination as the cornerstone of subsequent analysis. This anxiety was particularly evident during the preparation period, and almost all respondents expressed varying degrees of concern and stress. Their anxiety experience is not only limited to the psychological level, but also accompanied by a series of physical reactions, such as sweating, rapid heartbeat, insomnia, etc. These reactions significantly affect students' preparation efficiency and test performance. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of Thai university students' HSK test anxiety is very important for the subsequent analysis of the causes of anxiety and the proposed coping strategies.

3.2 The Causes of Thai university Students' HSK Test Anxiety

Through the coding and analysis of the interview content, this study identifies six main sources of Thai university students' HSK test anxiety:

Personal factors: Students' self-cognition, Chinese foundation and psychological adjustment ability are important internal factors affecting anxiety level.

Some students have obvious anxiety in the process of preparation and examination because of their lack of confidence in their Chinese level or overestimation of the difficulty of the examination.

Preparation: Whether the preparation is sufficient is directly related to the degree of students' anxiety.

Students with insufficient preparation, poor time management or poor implementation of the review plan are more likely to fall into anxiety due to concerns about test performance.

Concerns about test results: HSK scores are closely related to academic development and employment opportunities. Especially in the context of the widespread attention paid to the test in Thai society, students' excessive concern about the test results has become a key factor in exacerbating anxiety.

Family and social pressures: The family's expectation of academic performance, the social competition environment and the surrounding people's attention to the HSK test have all shaped and amplified the students' anxiety experience to a certain extent.

Educational environment and cultural background: Thailand's competitive education system strengthens the screening function of the examination. Students are in a high-pressure learning atmosphere for a long time, and it is easy to regard the HSK examination as an important barrier affecting future development, which in turn generates persistent anxiety.

Construction of social and cultural cognition: In the social and cultural context of Thailand, HSK test scores are often regarded as an important symbol to measure individual Chinese ability and social competitiveness. This kind of social consensus deepens students' cognitive burden on the meaning of examination and further induces anxiety.

To sum up, the sources of HSK test anxiety of Thai university students are multi-dimensional and interactive, involving multiple levels of individual cognition, behavioral preparation, social expectation and cultural construction, which need to be dealt with systematically.

3.3 The coping strategies of Thai university students' HSK test anxiety

Based on the perspective of intermediary regulation of social and cultural theory, Thai university students show the dual adjustment path of individual strategy and social and cultural mechanism in the response to HSK test anxiety.

Coping strategies at the individual level: In the preparation stage, students mainly through three ways to alleviate anxiety : one is the physical

and mental adjustment techniques, such as deep breathing, meditation and relaxation training, to ease the physiological tension; second, attention transfer activities, such as listening to music, watching short videos and other short-term relaxation methods; third, physical adjustment, through sports activities to enhance psychological resilience. During the exam, students are more likely to use rapid relaxation techniques (such as mindfulness meditation, muscle relaxation) to maintain emotional stability.

The moderating effect of social and cultural intermediary mechanism: Sociocultural factors have a moderating effect on anxiety through three types of mediating tools:

Cultural tools: Systematic Chinese courses help students familiarize themselves with the content and form of examinations, and reduce their anxiety about the unknown through structured learning;

Social relations: the teacher's preparation guidance and the family's emotional support constitute a social support, enhancing students' sense of control and security;

Mental symbols: Positive self-dialogue and cognitive reconstruction help students adjust their interpretation of the meaning of the test and reduce negative expectations.

Through the summary and analysis of Thai college students' HSK test anxiety coping strategies, we find that these strategies can alleviate students' anxiety and improve learning efficiency to a certain extent. The specific effects include:

Relieve stress: Relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and meditation can help students reduce the pressure of preparing for exams and restore their energy.

Improve learning efficiency: Through reasonable time management and learning method selection, students can make more effective use of time and improve learning efficiency.

Self-confidence Enhancement: Positive self-talk and family support can enhance students' self-confidence and make them braver to face exam challenges.

Promoting mental health: Participation in sports activities and social activities can improve students' mental health and enhance their resilience.

Discussion

This study set out to explore the lived experiences of HSK test anxiety among Thai university students through a socio-cultural lens. Our findings reveal that this anxiety is not merely an individual psychological response but a complex phenomenon deeply embedded within a web of social, cultural, and institutional forces. This perspective marks a departure from prior research on Chinese language testing in Thailand, which has predominantly focused on pedagogical techniques like error analysis (Zhang, 2021), and complements the extensive body of work on test anxiety in other high-stakes exams like TOEFL and IELTS by situating the emotional experience within a specific non-Western, cross-cultural context.

The constructed theoretical model of “symbolic capital-cross-cultural practice-cultural identity” provides a framework for understanding this complexity. It elucidates how the institutional power of the HSK certificate, as a form of symbolic capital governing access to career and academic opportunities, generates profound “instrumental anxiety.” This finding resonates with the pressures documented in global testing cultures but is uniquely intensified by the specific socio-economic dynamics of Thailand's relationship with China. Learners then navigate this anxiety through active cross-

cultural practices-such as forming study groups and consuming Chinese media-which serve as both coping mechanisms and sites for identity negotiation. Ultimately, the anxiety experienced is reframed as the emotional catalyst in an ongoing process of acculturation and the construction of a globalized professional identity.

However, this study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the phenomenological approach and modest sample size, while yielding rich qualitative insights, limit the generalizability of the findings. The experiences of our participants, primarily senior university students, may not fully represent those of working professionals or younger learners. Secondly, while the proposed theoretical model is insightful, it remains exploratory. Its constructs, particularly the dynamics of “cultural identity,” require further empirical validation and refinement through future research employing different methodologies, such as longitudinal studies. Finally, the study's focus on the socio-cultural dimension, while a strength, may have come at the expense of a detailed analysis of other relevant factors, such as specific personality traits or prior language learning history, which also interact with test anxiety.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the field by offering a nuanced, context-specific understanding of HSK test anxiety. It moves beyond a deficit view of anxiety as a mere impediment to instead highlight its role as a dynamic force within the cross-cultural learning process. The findings suggest that support for test-takers should extend beyond traditional study skills to include discussions on managing socio-cultural pressures and facilitating healthy identity negotiation, a recommendation that may hold value for educators in various high-stakes language testing contexts.

Recommendation

Based on the findings, this study offers targeted recommendations for Thai universities and researchers.

5.1 Practical Recommendations

For Thai universities and language institutes:

Curriculum Enhancement: Integrate discussions on the socio-cultural value of HSK and anxiety management directly into preparation courses, moving beyond pure language instruction.

Student Support Systems: Establish culturally-sensitive counseling and peer-mentoring programs that address test-specific stress and incorporate cognitive load regulation techniques.

Resource Development: Leverage technology by officially recommending high-quality learning apps and creating instructor-moderated online forums to reduce isolation and foster peer support.

5.2 Future Research

Subsequent studies should:

Employ longitudinal designs to track the dynamic evolution of anxiety.

Conduct cross-cultural comparisons within ASEAN to identify universal versus culture-specific anxiety factors.

Develop and test interventions, such as theory-based workshop series, through action research in Thai universities.

These coordinated efforts can transform theoretical insights into actionable support, creating a more effective and psychologically sustainable learning environment for Thai Chinese language students.

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