

Study on the Construction of Chinese Image Perception and Practice Education System for ASEAN Students in Guangxi

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Under the “Belt and Road” initiative, educational exchanges between China and ASEAN countries have become increasingly frequent. Currently, Guangxi has emerged as one of the provinces with the highest number of Southeast Asian international students studying in China. However, there are still certain misconceptions among ASEAN international students studying in Guangxi regarding their perception of China’s image. The foremost reason for this discrepancy lies in the existing cognitive education system implemented by educational institutions, which is disconnected from the youth population and does not align with the cognitive needs of international students. In order to construct a practical education system for ASEAN international students to enhance their perception of China’s image, this study focuses on the ASEAN international students studying in Guangxi and investigates the practical issues concerning the cognitive education of China’s image among this group.

Keywords: international students, China’s image, Southeast Asia, higher education

Introduction

Recent years, the increasing frequency of educational exchanges between China and ASEAN countries has attract a great attention with the influence of the “Belt and Road” policy. Due to its unique geographical advantages, Guangxi has emerged as an important gateway for economic and cultural exchanges between China and ASEAN countries. Many universities in Guangxi have signed educational exchange agreements with universities in various ASEAN countries, and both sides have sent numerous students to engage in mutual learning and exchanges. Currently, Guangxi has become one of the provinces with the highest number of Southeast Asian international students studying in China (Cheng, 2020). Against this backdrop, it is crucial to effectively tell China’s story to ASEAN international students and cultivate a group of foreign friends who have a deep understanding of and friendly relations with China. Constructing China’s image in the minds of international students is an important aspect of related work. This paper focuses on ASEAN international students studying in Guangxi and explores the issues of cognitive practice education regarding China’s image among this group.

Current Status of Perception of China’s Image Among ASEAN International Students in Guangxi

Composition of ASEAN International Students in Guangxi

At present, the majority of ASEAN international students studying in Guangxi come from Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Indonesia, while countries with a larger ethnic Chinese population like Malaysia and Singapore

are not the main source of ASEAN international students in Guangxi (Cen, 2019). This may be due to the relatively underdeveloped education systems in Vietnam, Laos, and Indonesia, and the scholarship support provided by Guangxi universities to ASEAN countries. Malaysia and Singapore, despite having well-developed Chinese communities, have a relatively better economic situation with higher per capita income, allowing their students to afford the expenses of studying in other countries or choosing key universities in China rather than Guangxi. The situation is unique for Thailand, as although it fares relatively well economically within ASEAN, the strong influence of Thai culture on the Chinese community and the westernization of Thai universities makes it challenging for ethnic Chinese students to study Chinese language in their own country, making China a favorable option for them. Another notable phenomenon is the significant differentiation in the educational levels of ASEAN international students studying in Guangxi based on their nationalities. The uneven distribution of ASEAN international students in vocational schools is particularly prominent. According to surveys, almost 90% of ASEAN international students in vocational schools are from Indonesia (Cen, 2020). The distribution among undergraduate degrees is relatively balanced across countries, but when it comes to master's and above, Vietnamese students constitute the majority, with Vietnamese students accounting for over 60% of doctoral degree students (Zhang, 2007).

Perception of China's Image Among ASEAN International Students in Guangxi

Currently, ASEAN international students in Guangxi have a relatively superficial perception of China's image. In a 2020 survey conducted among international students at Guangxi University for Nationalities, the majority of ASEAN students' impressions of China revolved around the perception that "Chinese people are wealthy" and "housing is expensive". In terms of China's national image, their understanding focused on the belief that "China is relatively friendly towards other countries", "China provides significant assistance to ASEAN countries", and "China has strong military power". Regarding culture, the students uniformly recognized China as an ancient civilization with a rich history, known for its "abundance of cuisine", "beautiful and numerous scenic spots", "exciting movies and TV programs", and the observation that "Chinese people enjoy drinking" (Ma, 2020).

It is worth mentioning the attitudes of international students towards China from the perspective of daily life. In interviews conducted by the author, almost all ASEAN international students mentioned China's online shopping and food delivery, considering them "very convenient". They described online shopping as "fast and affordable" and food delivery as "in a reasonable price and delicious". As most of the interviewees were relatively young, they frequently discussed topics related to mobile phone signals and gaming. They found that China had "fast internet", "good mobile phone signals with affordable internet fees", and "enjoyable mobile games". Some international students even mentioned that they made good Chinese friends through gaming. However, some students indirectly expressed inconveniences caused by the internet firewall, mentioning that certain games were "unavailable" and it was "inconvenient to communicate with friends in their own countries". Some students also expressed difficulties with "hard-to-use search engines".

Issues in the Perception Education of China's Image Among ASEAN International Students in Guangxi

Education Practices Not Aligned With the Preferences of Youth

Although ASEAN international students studying in Guangxi have diverse educational backgrounds, they are primarily young individuals aged between 20 and 30. Young students have a quick ability to adapt to new

things and possess strong information acquisition capabilities. To attract their interest, a variety of cultural products is needed. However, the current educational practices regarding the perception of China's image are often disconnected from the cognitive preferences of young people. Many of these practices still follow the traditional system of Confucius Institutes, emphasizing Chinese traditional culture. Activities often involve making zongzi (sticky rice dumplings), writing spring couplets, and eating mooncakes. In today's highly developed internet era, a young person in Cambodia can have access to the same cultural products as a young person in Paris. Similarly, if an activity fails to attract Chinese students' participation, it will naturally not be able to engage international students either.

In fact, China's cultural products have already achieved successful international recognition. For example, Chinese romance novels are very popular in Vietnam. Romance novelist Yeluo Wuxin's signing event in Vietnam caused quite a sensation, and the works of romance writer Gu Man are also bestselling books in Vietnam. The language used in Chinese romance novels has even influenced the language habits of contemporary young people in Vietnam. Chinese idol dramas are also well-received in Southeast Asian countries. The two male leads of the popular drama *The Untamed* even have dedicated local fan groups in Thailand. Iconic Chinese martial arts films represented by Jackie Chan and Jet Li are widely known throughout Southeast Asia.

Neglecting the Characteristics of International Students of Different Countries

Another issue is the complete disregard of the complex backgrounds and characteristics of ASEAN international students in educational practices. Instead, ASEAN is often viewed as a monolithic entity, and the cultures of ASEAN countries are considered "backward". This "cultural hegemony" mindset can greatly undermine the positive perception of China's image among international students.

In reality, ASEAN countries have varying levels of development and each possesses exceptionally strong indigenous cultural products. For example, contemporary Vietnam is heavily influenced by South Korean popular culture. The hit song "Where Are You" by singer Son Tung M-TP has garnered over 330 million views on YouTube. Thailand and Malaysia are cultural powerhouses in Southeast Asia, with strengths in film, music, and other fields. Malaysia has produced many well-known singers familiar to the Chinese audience. Indonesia has experienced rapid development in action films, and so on. Even if these students are studying in China, it does not mean that they have completely severed their cultural connections with their home countries. In fact, compared to Chinese culture, they are more likely to prioritize their own culture. To foster a positive perception of China's image among international students, strategic considerations are crucial.

Strategies for Perception Education of China's Image Among ASEAN International Students in Guangxi

Creating High-Quality Products and Establishing a National Brand

From practical experience, it is evident that the perception of China's image among international students is not achieved through top-down propaganda but through their understanding of Chinese products and brands. These "products" include not only tangible goods but also cultural products. Currently, the content of China's external propaganda media is relatively dull and fails to attract the interest of international students. In a 2019 interview, a Thai international student mentioned, "The news from the media is boring, and I don't like to watch it". There are barriers in terms of participation, interaction, and contextual understanding in the content of ASEAN and foreign countries' propaganda (Xie, 2011).

In reality, the current cultural “branding” efforts led by schools to shape China’s image have been largely unsuccessful. International students are not interested in activities such as making zongzi, writing spring couplets, or practicing tai chi, just as Chinese youth may not be interested in Vietnamese lion dances, Burmese puppet shows, or Laotian bathing Buddha festivals. What young people enjoy is recreational activities. ASEAN countries have established “cultural calling cards” through entertainment and consumer products, such as the Songkran Festival, Thai boxing, and white coffee. International students genuinely desire activities such as chatting with Chinese students, idol chasing, and playing video games.

Improving Management Models and Promoting Student Exchanges

However, the ideal scenario mentioned earlier has been difficult to achieve, largely due to the current management models applied to international students by universities. The current management model for international students is essentially the same as it was 30 years ago, characterized by differentiation and isolation. The fear of conflicting lifestyle habits between international and Chinese students leads to the creation of separate “student dormitories” for international students, hindering their daily interactions with Chinese students. While this management approach may be the “safest” and most relaxed, it is not conducive to the construction of China’s image in the minds of international students. The perception of China’s image goes beyond Chinese brands; it is primarily based on the personal connections they establish. If international students spend several years studying in China without making Chinese friends, how can they develop a meaningful perception of China’s image?

This isolation is the worst option for both parties involved. Chinese students have no contact with international students and only perceive them as living in “luxurious single apartments”, assuming that international students enjoy “privileges”. Instead of promoting cross-cultural communication and integration, it leads to discrimination and animosity towards international students. International students are also forced to remain within their own small circles. The cultural assimilation challenges that come with studying abroad are amplified in the context. During my interviews with students, I found that male international students had an easier time integrating into Chinese social circles due to their interest in sports. However, for international students who are not proficient in sports, integrating into Chinese social circles can be relatively difficult.

Changing the Way of Promotion to Facilitate Independent Communication

In fact, international students often shuttle between their home country and the host country, naturally functioning as cultural ambassadors. Similarly, the trust level of international students towards their fellow citizens is likely higher than their trust towards foreigners. Therefore, each international student is essentially a small-scale “self-media” platform, and their understanding of China’s image can influence a group of people’s perception of China. However, in the process of promotion, universities still rely too much on traditional top-down, one-sided, and selective “internal propaganda” style. In fact, no country’s image is entirely positive. In promoting China’s image, it is necessary to abandon the mindset of seeking quick success and show the best efforts instead of forcing acceptance. Individual-based “self-media” style communication should be encouraged.

Of course, this does not mean complete laissez-faire. The difficulty of international students’ integration is a challenge faced by every open country and internationalized university. It is the responsibility of universities to create conditions for international students to integrate. During the study abroad process, experiencing “cultural shocks” is unavoidable. Universities should provide appropriate interventions to prevent international students from forming negative impressions of China’s image due to anxiety, loneliness, and other negative emotions during this process (Liang, 2015).

Implementation Methods for Perception Education of China's Image Among ASEAN International Students in Guangxi

Breaking Communication Barriers and Establishing Communication Platforms Between International and Chinese Students

The prerequisite for implementing any methods is to change the current management model for international students and ensure that there are appropriate channels of communication and platforms for interaction between international and Chinese students. The common activities organized by universities include visits, outings, and holiday celebrations. However, these activities often face challenges. Holiday celebrations may be meaningful to Chinese students but not necessarily to international students, who may not be interested in participating. Visits organized by the university often involve museums and exhibition halls, which may not be of general interest unless related to specific academic disciplines. Outings are usually organized at the class level, and without prior communication, international students often form their own groups and have limited interactions with Chinese students.

Surveys have shown that ASEAN international students mainly acquire knowledge about China through online and mobile media, accounting for 41% and 64% of the respondents, respectively. Additionally, 46% of international students stated that interpersonal communication with teachers and classmates is an important means for them to understand Chinese culture. Therefore, establishing communication platforms between international and Chinese students through inter-school communication is crucial for international students to understand Chinese culture and form perceptions of China's image. Creating opportunities for international students and Chinese students to interact is the key to implementation.

Based on my experience, the most effective way to break the ice is through sports competitions, especially team sports such as basketball and football. In the intense collaboration and competition, students tend to forget cultural backgrounds and naturally engage in communication. African male international students often integrate into Chinese social circles more easily because many of them have a keen interest in football and possess good skills. They may even establish a certain reputation within social circles. However, sports competitions have certain barriers, and the participation of female students may be relatively low. In today's youth population, esports competitions, such as "League of Legends" and "Honor of Kings", are also effective ice-breaking activities. These games are popular not only among Chinese students but also among students from ASEAN countries. The university can consider organizing relevant activities to facilitate the initial communication between international and Chinese students.

Broadening Cultural Awareness and Establishing a Multidimensional Image of China

Chinese culture has a long history, particularly the Tang and Song Dynasties, which are often highlighted. However, the understanding of the Tang and Song Dynasties in current propaganda efforts is often one-sided, focusing solely on Tang poetry, Song lyrics, and traditional costumes, while neglecting the inclusive, diverse, and prosperous nature of the Tang and Song Dynasties. In fact, even in the relatively weak economic era of the 1980s, China successfully presented a cultural calling card—Kung Fu. Through martial arts films and martial arts stars, "Chinese Kung Fu" created a powerful and mysterious image of China. However, apart from this, cultural branding efforts relying on Confucius Institutes have not been successful. The current methods of promoting China's image to international students still largely rely on the Confucius Institutes system.

In light of this, universities must broaden their understanding of culture and recognize a fundamental truth: International students are not interested in mooncakes, flying kites, making zongzi, or practicing tai chi if Chinese students themselves do not enjoy these activities. Cultural calling cards that can truly resonate may be found in Chinese online novels, idol dramas, mobile games, online shopping, food delivery, high-speed rail, and cuisine. These cultural calling cards are modern, vibrant, rooted in daily life, rather than outdated, performative, and inaccessible after a single exposure. Only in this way can international students construct a modern, diverse, open, and inclusive image of China in their minds (Jiang, Yin, & Fu, 2019).

Enhancing the Quality of the Teaching Staff and Establishing Effective Communication and Management Mechanisms

Regardless of the methods adopted, the ultimate executors are the university's teachers. Therefore, it is essential to enhance the quality and level of the teaching staff. International students come from different cultural backgrounds and often experience "cultural shocks" or even "cultural shock" when suddenly entering the Chinese cultural environment. Similarly, Chinese students may unintentionally touch upon cultural taboos due to a lack of understanding of foreign cultures. In response, faculty members responsible for managing international students must have a basic understanding of various cultures and possess good bilingual abilities to serve as bridges for cross-cultural communication. They can help international students integrate into Chinese culture while facilitating Chinese students' understanding of foreign cultures (Quan, 2018).

Furthermore, international students have varying levels of Chinese language proficiency. Some students may already have a certain foundation in Chinese, while others may be beginners. Therefore, the university needs to arrange teachers at different levels to monitor the progress and proficiency of international students in real-time. It is also beneficial to offer courses tailored to international students' needs to help them adapt to the pace of Chinese language instruction. With the support of qualified teachers, students can establish a friendly and hospitable image of China.

Conclusions

Constructing China's image is a long-term endeavor that cannot be achieved overnight. International students, as direct mediators with Chinese culture, are the best ambassadors and sources of image dissemination. Paying attention to ASEAN international students, seizing common ground, innovating communication content, and adopting communication methods and strategies that align with the preferences of ASEAN international students are crucial for deepening the construction of China's image among this group. Universities need to start small and pay attention to the details, implementing student-centric management and fostering communication and exchange between Chinese and international students. Gradually, a modern, diverse, open, and inclusive image of China can be established, showcasing China as a responsible, accountable, and friendly major country. At the same time, this provides new opportunities for Guangxi Province to further expand its platform for international openness and move towards internationalization.

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