

Youth Role in Promoting Thai – Malaysian Intercultural Understandings: A Study on Interaction Patterns and Activities of International Students

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ABSTRACT: Cultural understanding between neighboring countries is necessary in building sustainable relationships. International student is one of the important actors representing and promoting their own culture in abroad while studying, and learning more about other cultures. When they completed their education, they also act as a messenger to deliver better cultural understandings to their friends and societies. At present, there are a number of international students in both Thailand and Malaysia, therefore we should take this opportunity as one of the channel to build a strong sense of mutual cultural understandings by conducting research on the role they play while studying abroad and to look for future supports in term of cultural promotions.

1. Background

Thailand and Malaysia share a long history of friendship with several collaborations in field of economics, trade and education et. In addition, people of both sides used to cross border frequently to visit their relatives, especially between the Thai Malay Muslims in the deep south of Thailand and the Malay-Thais in northern Malaysian province of Kelantan. These people are similar in term of language and cultures which are the advantage for strengthening relationship and promoting more interaction at the people level, it will help also to foster a strong sense of ASEAN community by 2015. Being a close neighbor, Thailand and Malaysia will have to work together more effectively to enhance socio cultural understandings both bilateral and multilateral engagement in the ASEAN.

Generally, Thailand and Malaysia have their own cultural identities i.e art and culture, ways of life, customs, religions and language. Although some may similar but there is a uniqueness in details. However, one of the most priorities of getting prepared for the upcoming ASEAN Social and Cultural Community in 2015 is to share and leaning different cultures among member countries as it's being encouraged well by local governments, private and people sectors of the member in order to create mutual understandings and peaceful living in multicultural society.

Internationalization of education has led to a significant increase in the importance of intercultural understanding. The strengthening of educational cooperation in preparation of ASEAN Social and Cultural Community is considered one of the

important mechanisms to drive a closer integration in cultural dimension. Nowadays, exchange student is more promoted by ASEAN member and especially between neighboring countries, including Thailand and Malaysia. There is a number of Thai students travel to Malaysia for educational purpose both in high school and university, a number of Malaysian students also study in Thailand. Besides a student role, they are like a "cultural diplomat", as they also promote culture, thought and life styles to their friends, these students also absorb and learning host country's culture. Several activities and interactions with local people during their study period are considered of the channel in promoting cultural understandings through exchanging experiences, languages, cuisines, life styles, norms and social beliefs. When they graduated and get back to their own countries, the understandings they learned will be distributed to others which help in building sustainable relationship between the two countries.

The research, therefore aim to study the interaction patterns and activities of international students both in Thailand and Malaysia by survey and observe attitudes before and after experiencing each other's culture, the way they make interactions, activities and its results, as well as to recommend a tangible approach in developing and promoting "Thai-Malaysian student network for mutual cultural understandings"

2. Objectives

1. To study international students' attitude before and after experiencing each other' culture.

2. To study interaction patterns and activities amongst international students during their study period in term of promoting intercultural understandings.
3. To study the impact and results following their role in cultural diffusion and learning host country culture as well.
4. To suggest an approach to build Thai-Malaysian student network and enhance international student exchange program for promoting intercultural understandings

3. Research Methodology

Mix research methodology of quantitative and qualitative used for collecting data from both Thai and Malaysian students with the questionnaire created from our literature review. Focus group discussion of related intercultural persons will be added to verify reliable data. The research will be carried out in Thailand and Malaysia. International students at university level of both countries and whom they interact with are the primary target population.

4. Conceptual Framework & Literature Review

We have reviewed the related theories, concepts and empirical documents which convey to formulate the conceptual framework for the research. The research will be composed of the documentary study, quantitative and qualitative researches, as follow.

4.1 Intercultural Understanding and Internationalization of Education

According to the Standard Dictionary of the English Language (Funk & Wagnalls, 1970: 1368), 'understanding' means "the sum of the mental powers by which knowledge is acquired, retained, and extended; the power of apprehending relations and making inferences (deductions, conclusions) from them". It can also mean "an agreement between two or more persons; sometimes an arrangement or settlement of differences, or of disputed points". In the present context, intercultural understanding included close acquaintance, empathy and appreciation between people of different cultures.

Stone (2006) outlined the importance of individuals possessing the capacity to associate with individuals

from diverse cultures, due to "the advent of more globalized economies, markets and international alliances; the rapid development of new information and communication technologies; vastly increased international mobility; the growing multicultural profile of most societies across the world; and the "internationalization" of education programs and institutions" (Stone 2006, p.335).

4.2 The need to understand and recognize cultural differences

People from different cultures tend to perceive the world differently, but are sometimes unaware of alternative ways of perceiving, believing, behaving and judging. Hall (1959; 1976) contends that most people hold unconscious assumptions about what is appropriate in terms of space, time, interpersonal relations and ways of seeking truth. These assumptions may cause intractable difficulties in intercultural encounters. A conscious effort must therefore be made to overcome ethnocentric attitudes and to recognize the cultural differences between nations and ethnic groups. According to Bennet (2003: 48-51), this recognition process takes place in six stages: denial, defence, minimizing, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. Therefore, interaction of international students could help to pave the way to understanding and recognize cultural differences.

4.3 Intercultural communication

People communicate within and between cultures by means of language, which is therefore central to their social relationships. It both reveals and marks status, power, authority, and levels of education. Cultural differences therefore tend to be revealed in language, and misunderstandings between people from different cultures tend to arise from their use of language to communicate with each other (Campbell, 2004:62).

However, effective intercultural communication depends on both the language and the cultural perceptions and priorities of whoever one interacts with. Culture-specific perceptions and priorities are evident from a specific cultural code (symbols, manners, dress, and gestures) (Skeie, 2005:249). Successful communication is only possible on the

basis of a shared code. "To share a code you must know the meaning of the foreign word(s) and the meaning must be the same in both languages for if it is different, the code is not shared" (Ter-Minasova, 2003:302). People should therefore be sensitive to the way in which members of other cultures perceive reality and why; how they express their perceptions; and importantly, how their perceptions differ from those of other cultures (Campbell, 2004). It follows, too, that although language is the primary vehicle of communication, non-verbal communication is equally important.

Internationalization of education has also led to a significant increase in the importance of intercultural understanding and competencies for students. The increasing numbers of international students studying abroad and new immigrant students have also led to growing diversity and multiculturalism of the student population. This implies that intercultural understanding and competencies are also important for local students as well

Therefore, being a close neighbor and to foster a strong sense of ASEAN community especially social and cultural community, Thailand and Malaysia will have to work together more effectively to enhance socio cultural understandings both bilateral and multilateral engagement, and to enhance interaction and activities of international students in promoting Thai-Malaysian cultural understanding, and to strengthening their role & network as a seed to our future prosperity and friendship.

From the above conceptual framework and operational definition, we intend to study the beliefs, values, feeling, thinking and reacting of the Thai and Malaysian students. Through activities, we will explore the contents of their communication and interaction, mutual understanding, cultural diffusion learning host country culture and also International student network for intercultural understanding, before and after periods. These data will indicate the impacts and results of their participation in the Exchange Program which will help us to analyze and synthesis the guidelines for promoting the intercultural understanding of Thai and Malaysian youth.

5. Research Findings

There are 1,500 Thai students studying in various universities in Malaysia. Most of them come from

Southern Thailand (70%) Central Region (29%) and others (1%), mostly self-financing, popular universities the Thai students prefer are International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) Multimedia University (MMU) University Utara Malaysia (UUM) University Teknologi PETRONAS (UTP) University Malaya (UM) University Sains Malaysia (USM) Kolej University Islam Antarabangsa Selangor (KUIS) Kolej University Insaniah (KUIN), there are Thai muslim student club in every university under Thai Student Association in Malaysia (TSAM) as central coordination.

Less numbers of Malaysian students in Thailand. Most of them come through the exchange program with scholarships such as ASEAN INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY FOR STUDENTS PROGRAMME (AIMS). During the past 5 years, total number of Malaysian students came to studied in Thailand under this program was 86 (and 97 of Thai students in same period). They came from different domiciles i.e. Kedah, Kuala Lumpur, Negeri Sembilan, Penang, Selangor, Tumpat Kalantan. At the beginning, they faced communication problem as most of Thai do not speak English, rare halal food, but they can adjust themselves and impressed on Thai hospitality and beautiful locations

The study reveals that the sample international students from both countries have a variety of attitudes and perceptions on their neighboring culture depending on various factors, especially domicile of origin and close cultural proximity of individual. Even before going to or experience neighboring country, some of them viewed and perceived one another's country image in varying degree, some have no idea at all. But after experiencing and interacting while studying, they know more and understanding each other, causing positive attitude and impressed on many aspects of neighboring cultures.

International Students of both countries have a constructive – perceptive attitude towards each other's image, even before traveling to study as well as after getting admission. It helps for the living together in harmony and cross – cultural interaction

For the joint activities and interaction between the international students, mostly are unofficial activities. There are not many joint activities

organizing together, joint activities are mostly University's event or the activities that University and international student jointly organized like annual cultural show. By the way, most of the student exchange programs are not designed or encourage for cultural exchange and joint activities between local and international students

Most of the Thai students in Malaysia come from the South of Thailand, they get use to Malaysian life as their similar ways of life in religion, language and culture or even some have relatives in Malaysia. They feel studying in Malaysia is better because of using English and more safety than in Thailand especially those who come from 3 hazardous provinces of the Southern Thailand. They spend their own expenses.

Samplings: Thai Students in Malaysia & Malaysian Students in Thailand

Thais in Malaysian (N= 50)		Malays in Thailand (N= 29)	
Female	68 %		48.15 %
Male	32%		51.85%
Nationality: Thai	100%	Malaysian	100 %
Religion: Islam	100%	Buddhist	51.85 %
		Islam	33.33%
		Christian	14.82 %
19-24 yrs	40%		66.67 %
25-30 yrs	24%		25.92%
30 + yrs	36%		7.4%
Bachelor Degree	60%		51.85%
Master Degree	36 %		40.75%
Doctoral Degree	4%		7.4%
Personal Expense	100%	Scholarships from Exchange Program	100%

For the Thai student in Malaysia and other foreign student, they have more activities and feel more camaraderie or closeness than with Malaysian friend. It is because of the same feeling as "foreigner" and viewed Malaysian "local people", but no conflict behavior as they are adaptable. The different of local or culture of domicile where the student belong is a factor determined closeness and mutual activities.

Thai students are more closer to Malaysian students who belong to Klantan, Decar, Trang Kanu, etc because of proximity and adjacent area which has a similar culture. Thai-Buddhist students tend to be

closer with the Chinese Malaysian student from Kuala Lumper, with similar culture

Less numbers of Malaysian students in Thailand. Most of them come through the exchange program with scholarships. At the first time they suffer from communication problem as most of Thai do not speak English, rare halal food, but they can adjust themselves and impressed on Thai hospitality and beautiful locations.

For the Malaysian student in Thailand, their activities with Thai friends are mostly informal and learning Thai culture through interpersonal relations with Thai friends.

In learning the culture of host country, although international students of both side rarely having formal activities with local friends but spending time together in daily life, they have learned each other i.e. way of life, social and cultural aspects, nature of differences etc. Besides this, their perception towards each other is the reason behind distantly related and caused rarely having activity and interaction together formally and informally as most of the Malaysian student viewed Thai and other foreign student "playful, hilarious, rivets, etc.", while foreign student including Thai viewed most of Malaysian students "quiet and peaceful, simple, privacy, do not like chaos, studying seriously, rarely socialized with unfamiliar people, thoughtful, fearful etc. Cultural diffusion, learning, sharing and exchanging through student daily life rather than formal activity.

For the cultural exchange among them, they play a very important role not only their main cultural transmission (Thai or Malaysian main culture) but they brought with them different local cultures of their various domicile of origin, which allow them to have a broader and deeper intercultural understanding. While studying abroad, they performed as representatives of their own countries and put effort to make the others clearly understand their cultures which is very beneficial for intercultural learning.

The Thai student in Malaysia realize the importance to learn and understanding Malaysian culture because it gives better business opportunity at international level, also because it helps to understand the culture of neighboring country and it gives new ideas and different perspectives. While Malaysian student in Thailand do not concern much

about the business opportunity which reflect and stress that Malaysian economic position is better than Thailand. Malaysian students in Thailand stress the important to learn the culture of Thai culture because the knowledge and information obtained from such experience can be shared further to Malaysian community so that they may have better understanding about Thai culture in the long run and for promoting people to people rapprochement.

Graduates recall what they impressed during their studies, they set up various Alumni Clubs to be a place for meeting friends and coordination.

In conclusion, the international students play an important role in building understanding across cultures. It helps to promote not only main culture of the country but also various local domiciled culture. They also play role in both cultural diffusion and learning culture of host country, adaptability. Being a neighbor, International student stresses the importance to learn and understanding each other's culture that would benefit them, society and country as a whole. Interpersonal intercultural relations help international students from both sides, Thailand and Malaysia understand each other such as social values, beliefs, behaviors.

The study found that there are many student exchange programs, both within the framework of the ASEAN regional projects or AIMS and through cooperation between various universities of the two countries. Noticed that the framework of ASEAN project is big, and although it includes all ten member states in the program but there were less number of student join it, due to limit of exposure and accessibility (opportunity to reach). The ASEAN Universities Network or AUN does not cover most of the universities of ASEAN. The number of student from different countries joining the program also indicate the imbalance of exchange i.e. students from some countries prefer to study in some particular countries but not in another. For example, many Thai students under AIMS project go to study in Malaysia in exchange of huge proportions as compared to the number of Malaysian students in Thailand. Generally, there are not so many exchange program between the universities which initiated and signed mutual agreement of cooperation among themselves in specific field and faculty only. The university must seek cooperation partners and matching among themselves, which sometime caused obstacles in

coordination. This resulted that could be difficult in the expansion of the exchange program. Therefore, the relevant authorities particularly public organizations should promote or facilitate the educational institution to develop exchange program more broad and comprehensive. Government should support budget, information, and public relations in order to encourage the development of more and more exchange program between Thailand and Malaysia for both public and private universities. Thai and Malaysian government may consider set up a joint fund for initiating bilateral exchange program.

Student exchange program should be designed to focus more on promoting activities for intercultural understanding both formal and informal activities, or maybe integrated as part of the course like conducting a special cultural class for Thai and Malaysian students, allow credit transfer, practical activities as part of learning evaluation etc.

Suggestions and Recommendation

To strengthen the youth role in promoting intercultural understanding, there are suggestions and recommendation from the study as follows

1. Promoting Thai -Malaysian Intercultural Understanding among international students of both countries and other neighbor as well for strengthening people to people relationship and more deeply understanding each other culture.
2. Related agencies of both side should support the role and activities of international student which promote cultural understanding and exchange, before going – during their stay and after completing education. Push forward the establishment of Thai –Malaysian Student Networks, this will maximize benefit for both countries and will be useful for student individually, societies and long term international relations
3. Establishment of Thai-Malaysian Student Network and Alumni to coordinate and promote understanding between neighbors, use the existing student club, association, network connecting student and alumni as well as universities academic network. Such kind of network will help to strengthen a sustainable role and activities of international students, in order to promote intercultural understanding and enhance people to people relations as well as reinforce educational

cooperation, promoting positive image of the two countries. This will fulfill more formal activities and interaction patterns of international students and also increase the role of existing network to push forward the above mentioned activities

4. Both side should support more scholarship for increasing the number of student exchange, also support and funding activities of student through the mentioned network. Government and Educational Institution of Thailand and Malaysia should provide scholarships for students for increasing a number of student exchanges, funding its own student or for students of another country, or set up a joint fund for promote and enhance student exchange program.

5. Government and educational agencies should 1) enhance student exchange program and 2) the student exchange program should design and emphasize more on cultural exchange both formal and informal form, maybe integrated as part of the course like conducting a special cultural class for Thai and Malaysian students, allow credit transfer, practical activities as part of learning evaluation etc.

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Thai online resources and website

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14. <http://www.mfa.go.th/main/th/world/.html>
15. http://www.sbpac.go.th/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=1524:2014-02-27-14-13-00&lang=en
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