

**About author:**

1. Juan Lei

Affiliation (1): Global Relations Division, Current Doctoral student, Mae Fah Luang University, Chiang Rai, Thailand, 57100

Affiliation (2): The Office of International Exchange and Cooperation Affairs, Teacher, Pu'er University, China, 665000

2. Yong Chen

Affiliation: Foreign Language School, Dean, Pu'er University, China, 665000

## **Exploration on the Cultivation Program of Lao International Students in Pu'er University (PU) of Yunnan Province in China**

**Abstract**

Under the background of internationalization of higher education in China, almost universities seek internationalization as its final purpose. As the third-tier university in China, which is located in border ethnic areas with weak foundation of running school, Pu'er University tries to use its geographic advantages to communicate with neighboring countries in Lancang-Mekong river region, whose international students program is mainly introduced by Lao student cultivation program. In order to find out its strengths and weakness of the program and its contribution to PU's internationalization, the present study tries to use qualitative research method with interviews to inquire. The result shows that unmatch between the theoretical cultivation program and its implementation in reality. While, even there were some weaknesses appeared in convergence cultivation after one-year preparatory learning, the cultivation program really did some contribution on internationalization of PU. Hence, making a proper cultivation plan for major learning and establishing a sound management system are required for future job.

**Key words:** Pu'er university; Lao student cultivation program; internationalization; interview

### **1. Introduction**

In education policy studies, there has been a trend of focusing on micro political process turns to practitioners, and the resistance to the separation of policy making and implementation has been growing (Lesley Vidovich, 2002). The policy cycle advocated

by Lesley Vidovich (2002) that combines both ‘macro constraint’ and ‘micro agency’ is used as the dominant methodological approach to inquire influences given by different levels of power on making the cultivation program of Lao international students in Pu’er University of Yunnan province in China.

### **1.1 Using Vidovich’s approach to analyze the influences from national policy support level on the production of Laos international student cultivation program from a macro aspect**

“The social context of language learning and teaching is greatly impacted by a nation’s political decision to give special status to a particular language or languages” (Sandra Lee McKay & Rani Rubdy. 2009, p.10). Jiani Ma and Kai Zhao (2018) stated that in the process of international student education, Chinese government conducted macro-level management by setting overall policies and guidelines referring to each aspect of students’ recruitment, quality assessment and entrusting non-governmental organizations. Hence, in China, the government plays a key role in the learning and teaching of foreign languages. In April 2016, the policy document called *Some Opinions on Doing a Good Job in Opening up Education to the World in the New Period* (Opinions for short) was released by General Office of the CPC Central Committee and General Office of the State Council, which showed the orientations to and accelerated the development of Chinese opening-up education.

*The Opinions* are made for improving the level of opening-up education to the world, better meeting the people’s diversified and high-quality education needs, also better serving the overall economic and social development. There are four main parts in the Opinions: accelerating the development of study abroad and improving the quality of study abroad; improving the institutional mechanism and raising the level of running schools abroad; strengthening high-end leadership and enhancing China’s educational strengths and innovation ability; enriching the contents of people-to-people exchanges between China and foreign countries and promoting mutual understanding.

In recent years, the promotion of Chinese language strength and effectiveness has made more and more foreigners been keen to Chinese learning, which seems to be a challenge for English teaching and learning (Yi Liu, 2017). In order to support the internationalization in higher education, Chinese government provides various kinds of scholarship in different administrative levels. In 2005, the Chinese Ministry of Education set ‘National Special Scholarship’ to provinces near the national borders. Since 2015, the Ministry of Education allocates the number of national scholarships to support local government scholarship programs according to the amount of local government scholarships established in each province (Long Gao, 2021).

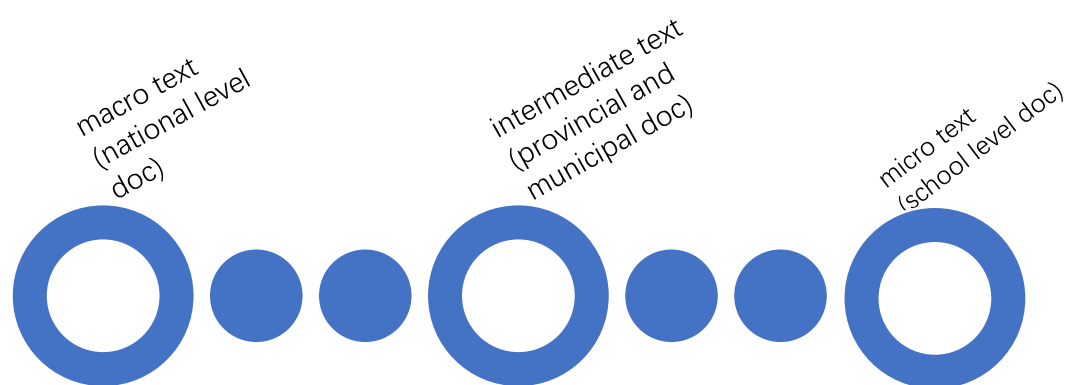
### **1.2 Using Vidovich’s approach to analyze the influences from provincial and municipal policy support levels on the production of Laos international student cultivation program from intermediate aspect**

On the guide of construction layout of provincial orientations proposed by President Xi Jinping to Yunnan province in January 2015, President Xi pointed that it was hoped that Yunnan would take the initiative to serve and integrate into the national

development strategy, break out a road of leapfrog development, and strive to become a demonstration area of national unity and progress, a leader in the construction of ecological civilization, and a radiation center facing Southeast Asia and South Asia, so that to write a good chapter of the Chinese dream of Yunnan. These orientations have become the future targets for Yunnan province's social, economic, cultural and educational development.

### 1.3 Using Vidovich's approach to analyze the influences from school level

The former president of PU, Mr. Wenzhang Cheng (2018) pointed the universities located along with the 'One Belt and Road' route should cooperate with related countries along the road actively and cultivate jointly the high-quality talents to meet the development needs. As one of the members of the third development tier universities in China, PU put forward the theory of differential internationalization, which means implementing international regional education focusing on the cooperation with South Asian and Southeast Asian countries (2018). Since 2006, Simao Teachers' College, the predecessor of Pu'er University, has cooperated with Pu'er municipal government to recruit Laos students for junior college education. According to the Memorandum of Cooperation between Pu'er municipal government in China and Fong Sali provincial government in Laos, Pu'er municipal government provides local government scholarship to support Laos international to study in Simao Teachers' College.



Hence, as the production of education policy, the formulation of cultivation program of Lao international students here is influenced by the conceptual guidelines from national, provincial and school's levels.

## 2. Contents of the analysis

### 2.1 Internationalization of higher education in China

During the process of globalization, higher education as one part of informal governmental diplomacy, has played a key role in the international cooperation and

cultural communication. The internationalization of higher education in China has made considerable progress and has contributed to transforming the Chinese education system into one of the largest and arguably most promising systems in the world (Yang, 2014). Internationalization is the final pursuit for higher education institutions in China. According to the statistics of international students in China released by Ministry of Education of China (04, 2019), a total of 492,185 foreign students coming from 196 countries and regions studied at 1,004 higher education institutions in districts and cities of 31 provinces in 2018, which has increased 3,013 students accounted for 0.62% (the above data do not include Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan). Statistically by country, the Laos was the eighth owned 14,645 students. China is becoming a “sending” nation and a key “receiving” nation in the global education (Ma, 2017).

While, the development of universities in China shows various levels. There are three main trends to divide universities’ development tiers (Wenzhang Cheng, Hongbing Dai, Long Gao, & Shougang Yin, 2018). One is national first-tier university, such as Peking University and Tsinghua University; another one is provincial key institutions that cooperate with famous institutions in European and American regions; the last one is newly upgraded undergraduate institutions, which are located in border ethnic areas with weak foundation of running school.

Pu’er University is a national public university in Yunnan Province of China belonging to the last one tier mentioned above (2018), which was established in 1978 as a college, and upgraded to a 4-year university in 2012. Thanks to the geographic advantage to Laos, which has 4,060 km borderline adjoining Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar, as well as neighboring on Thailand, Nepal and Cambodia, Pu’er University implemented its international communication in 2006. In order to join the internationalization trend, Pu’er University tried to walk on the path of differential internationalization focusing on the cooperation with Thailand and Laos (Long Gao, 2021). Pu’er University started to recruit Lao students for undergraduate degree in 2017. During the year from 2006-2016, the school only had the qualification to recruit Chinese language learning students as junior college education. In 2016, since school’s institutional reform, there was born a new secondary school called ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Studies that replaced the Office of International Communication and Exchange Affairs to be in charge of international students’ teaching and management.

## **2.2 A brief introduction to relevant policy texts in school level**

### **(1) Cultivation Program of Lao International Students in Pu’er University (PU)**

The general international student education policy mainly interpreted by the cultivation program of Lao International students in PU is called “1+4” plan, which includes 1 year for preparatory learning plan and 4-year for professional learning plan in different major selected by students themselves. Hence, there should be two sets of cultivation program for Lao students. According to the International Preparatory Education Program released by the secondary school of ASEAN Studies (2021), there are two exceptions for international students could be recruited as undergraduate major when they apply for full-time undergraduate study in PU: one is that student has gained

the certification of HSK level 4 or 5 (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi: Chinese level examination) with validation for two years; the another is that student who studies Chinese as required courses in secondary education and could be approved by graduate school. For students who doesn't have the HSK Level 4 or 5 certificate when they apply for undergraduate learning in PU, before they enter into professional learning, they should at least pass the exam of HSK Level 3 during the preparatory learning.

<b>Table 1: Preparatory Education Plan for International Students</b>
1. Target students for Cultivation: international students or overseas Chinese aiming for undergraduate learning; international students or overseas Chinese engaging in advanced language studies.
2. Cultivation Objectives: to have a certain degree of Chinese communication skills and cross-cultural communication skills; to meet with the requirements for Chinese language levels to different majors; to have a certain degree of professional knowledge.
3. Period of Schooling: in principle, it is 1 or 2 academic years. For some freshmen who have a certain basic for Chinese, the period of learning could be adjusted properly.
4. Curriculum and Teaching Methods: to adopt an approach of enhancement to education that combines language teaching as main task and professional knowledge teaching as the assisted instruction. The courses include required courses and selected courses.
5. Teaching principles: (1) Student-oriented principle; giving full play to teachers' leading roles. (2) Orienting the listening and speaking skills are the main teaching tasks, and the reading and writing skills are as secondary tasks. (3) Paying attention to enlightening teaching and guiding students to discuss. (4) Introducing excellent culture of Chinese nation and respecting Chinese learners' national culture. (5) Using Chinese to teach.

Table 1 From International Preparatory Education Program released by the secondary school of ASEAN Studies in Pu'er University, 2021

One of the key points of traditionalism shows that “traditionalism is rooted in a belief in the value of a cultural and disciplinary heritage, of which academic are custodians. The role of schools is to transmit this heritage to the next generation who are expected to receive it passively and gratefully” (Trowler P., 2003). From Table 1, there are some key words reflected traditionalism ideology that are Chinese communication skills, cross-cultural communication, Chinese national culture and learners' national culture. It is predictable to see during the process of Lao student cultivation, both Chinese and Laos national culture could be obtained and maintained well. Student-oriented principle may be a reflection of progressivism that claims student-centered “in the sense of valuing students' participation in planning, delivering, assessing and evaluating courses” (Trowler P., 2003). For more understanding of the

program for the preparatory education, which focus more on improving students' Chinese communication skills, a table of curriculum for the preparatory education is provided as below:

<b>Table 2: Curriculum for the Preparatory Education</b>		
	<b>Course Name</b>	<b>Period (hours)</b> (40 mins/lesson; 18 weeks/semester)
The 1 <sup>st</sup> semester	Comprehensive Chinese	40*10*18=7200 mins/120 hours
	Chinese Listening	40*4*18=2880 mins/48 hours
	Chinese Speaking	40*4*18=2880 mins/48 hours
	Chinese Reading	40*4*18=2880 mins/48 hours
	Chinese Writing	40*2*18=1440 mins/24 hours
The 2 <sup>nd</sup> semester	Comprehensive Chinese	40*10*18=7200 mins/120 hours
	Chinese Listening	40*4*18=2880 mins/120 hours
	Chinese Speaking	40*4*18=2880 mins/120 hours
	Chinese Reading	40*4*18=2880 mins/120 hours

Table 2 From International Preparatory Education Program released by the secondary school of ASEAN Studies in Pu'er University, 2021

(2) Convergence in education management for Laos students who learn in different majors

At the end of the first preparatory learning phase, students will be allowed to choose major for undergraduate plan according to their own personal willingness, which may stand in line with progressivism, since the progressive values students' freedom of choice and personal development a lot (Trowler P., 2003). After students join into different major learning, the cultivation plan for these international will be made by the secondary school setting the major. There is convergence in requirements for teaching and management between Laos students and Chinese students (Xuangao Meng, 2020). That means after Laos students finish preparatory learning and learn different majors, the secondary school uses the same standards as Chinese students in specific major's learning to evaluate Laos students.

### **3. Research questions**

- (1) What is the contribution of the research to the construction of PU's internationalization?
- (2) What are the strengths and weakness of the cultivation program of Lao students in PU compared with its practice in reality?

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 About participants**

In order to answer the two research questions from first hand materials, interviews to related key participants in the cultivation program about its practice in reality were used.

All the participants of interviews were chosen purposefully. Considered about the

administrative management in PU, which the secondary school of ASEAN Studies is responsible for Lao students teaching and management affairs mainly and other secondary schools mainly shoulder major courses teaching, the researchers chose 4 key related participants to be interviewed. Also, the main key implementers such as policy-makers, administrators and some managers as well as instructors who were directly involved in the issue were chosen as interviewees. For respecting the interviewees, all of them were recorded as P1, P2, P3 and P4 anonymously. They were the two participants (P1 and P2) from ASEAN Studies school that was in charge of Lao student cultivation program making. Other two participants included one (P3) from the office of Student Affairs Management that monitored and gave all students' comprehensive quality assessment and another (P4) from Foreign Language Teaching school that was chosen by some Lao students as major learning.

#### 4.2 Data collection

Mannheim and Rich (1995, p164) claimed that “elite interviewers have to assume that potential respondents differ in how much they can contribute to the study and that each respondent has something unique to offer”. The way of interview was face to face. Before started the interviews, researchers consulted all interviewees and asked permission to use digital voice recorder while interviewing. Each interview lasted twenty to twenty-five minutes. There was only one type of interview using open-ended questions in Chinese. The purpose for using this kind of question and answering in Chinese was to give more chances on free talk with various sub-themes with a flexibility and variety of response that were likely to reveal in-depth details. A list of questions was prepared as printed ones to help interviewees to understand. Since the interviewees from different departments with various responsibilities, some questions designed purposively to definite interviewees would not be used for other interviewees.

No.	Questions	Interviewees
1	It is known that internationalization is one of our university's development orientations. When you design the cultivation program, how do you link the program with the orientation?	P1, P2
2	When you design the cultivation program, what are the main factors you consider about? Such as economic market needs for talent.	P1, P2
3	What are the strengths and weakness of the cultivation program?	P1, P2, P3, P4
4	During the implementation of Lao student cultivation program, is there any weakness you have found? Could you please list some? Any suggestions to improve the weakness?	P1, P2, P3, P4
5	Do you think the cultivation to Lao students in reality has met the standard in the cultivation program? If not, what are the aspects?	P1, P2, P3, P4

**Table 3 The list of questions designed differently**

### 4.3 Critical process of interview

The interviews aimed to discover the strengths and weakness of implementing the Lao student cultivation program in reality. Since the interviewees were department leaders who were the direct and indirect implementers of the program, these elites could have stereotype thinking way in mind and it may be difficult to speak freely about their own weakness or on controversial issues (Harrison, 2001, p.99). After interviewing, it was clear to notice some of the interviewees were remarkably critical, and open to share their real experiences.

## 5. Results

The first two questions on Table 2 were mainly aimed at two participants from the secondary school of ASEAN Studies. In terms of question 1: It is known that internationalization is one of our university's development orientations. When you design the cultivation program, how do you link the program with the orientation? Both two participants (P1 and P2) shared with similar opinions. When designed the cultivation program, internationalization as one of the orientations of PU's development must be considered. They thought highly of geographic advantages that bordered on Laos and Myanmar and recruited students mainly from these two countries. Considered about the function of language to communicate, the course setting on two sets of cultivation program was paid more attention to basic Chinese language and culture. At the same time, they arranged all kinds of activities after class and outside school to help students know more about the real China. About question 2: when you design the cultivation program, what are the main factors you consider about? For this question, both two participants expressed that the needs of markets and society were the initial factors they considered. P1 pointed students were from five countries in Lancang-Mekong river region. After graduating, students should be practical on some aspects related with foreign affairs, economics, trade and education with high sense of social responsibility. P1 also discussed that when students started to choose the major learning, they would give suggestions to consider about the less specialized professions in Southeast Asia. It was clear to see both P1 and P2 kept similar ideas on these two questions with affirmative attitudes.

However, from the third to the last questions in Table 2, since another two participants were from different departments, there were disagreements on their opinions, especially on exposures of weakness. For question 3: What are the strengths and weakness of the cultivation program? The common features on explaining strengths were consistency of language course teaching within five years and practical competence on some techniques, such as making tea and coffee. P3 still added that through this program, we enhanced the cooperation with Chinese enterprises in Laos and laid the foundation for Lao students' future job opportunities. Besides, P3 stated that PU provided more scholarships, which raveled students' concerns. In terms of weakness of the program, P1, P2 and P4 pointed out that after one-year preparatory learning, students could join into different major learning. The problem was that the foundation of Chinese was not solid, which influenced their professional learning.



For question 4: During the implementation of Lao student cultivation program, is there any weakness you have found? Could you please list some? Any suggestions to improve the weakness?

P1, P2, and P3 pointed out that weakness including unsolid foundation of high school; no Lao-Chinese courses made specially for Lao students; no cultivation plan for students who joined into different major learning; to some extends, lowering the learning requirements to Lao students, so that the quality of cultivation showed unbalance. The suggestions given by P3 were insisting the consistency of language course teaching within five years and after-class tutoring and making proper cultivation plan for them.

P4 expressed the same opinions as weakness of the program extracted above. The suggestions given by P4 were insisting the consistency of language course teaching within five years and after-class tutoring.

For the question 5: Do you think the cultivation to Lao students in reality has met the standard in the cultivation program? If not, what are the aspects?

Both P1 and P2 kept the same opinions that the cultivation in reality has been basically reached the standard in the cultivation program. While different opinions were expressed by P3 and P4. P3 expressed the cultivation in reality did not meet the standard in the program. For example, when Lao students joined into different major to learn, there was no standard cultivation plan for them.

P4 thought it was hard to meet the standard in the cultivation program. The first point was Lao students were not required to choose all courses on major cultivation program after preparatory learning. That was to say insufficient school credits. The second point was the final exam paper was used both for Lao students and Chinese students. The results of Lao students were very poor. The third point was when Lao students joined into different major to learn, there was no standard cultivation plan for them. Suggestions: enhancing the management of Lao students and making a standard cultivation plan for Lao students who join different majors. Making a suitable course setting of clear modules of each kind of course. Improving Lao students' exam and evaluation ways.

To answer the research questions of the present study based on the above data collection, it is obvious that the cultivation program of Lao students really plays its pivotal role on Pu'er university's internationalization construction enhancing the mutual friendship between China and Laos. However, besides the advantage of Chinese language teaching, the weakness of convergence management in different major learning cannot be ignored. Internationalization brings benefits to Pu'er university, but it also calls for more higher requirements to international student cultivation, which should think more about the needs of economic and social markets. Only combine the language communication skills and professional knowledge, an international talent could be.

## **6. Results discussion**

Through the analysis of data collection of interviews, the most argumentative

issues were on the cultivation program of students who joined into different majors learning after one-year Chinese preparatory learning. But for the cultivation program, they seldom pointed out the weakness. The cultivation objectives showed in Table 1 were to have a certain degree of Chinese communication skills and cross-cultural communication skills; to meet with the requirements for level of Chinese language to different majors; to have a certain degree of professional knowledge. Based on the results from interviews, there were evidences to show unmatched between Lao students' cultivation in reality and in cultivation program. For the reasons why P1 and P2 kept a positive attitude to this evaluation may be that they are the policy-makers who try to keep this program in a stable development, since the program has cultivated some talents contributing to the communication between China and Laos with 95 graduates working for Laos government, Chinese enterprises in Laos, and various walks of life in Laos. To some extent, the cultivation program supported PU to meet the internationalization in the university.

## **7. Limitations**

- (1) This research is conducted from the teachers' angle, especially from the policy makers' point of view. The researcher focuses on the process of education policy implementation, while lacking the attention to the process of students' knowledge acquisition and the evaluation from students on the cultivation mode.
- (2) Almost all the policy documents are written in Chinese. The skill of translation is a big challenge for researcher. To some extent, it is hard to keep balance between the original text and translation version, so the translation version could reduce or strengthen the original text meaning, which will affect the policy analysis.

## **8. Suggestions for future study**

The present study mainly focuses on the policy making of Lao international student cultivation program and its implementation from the aspect of policy maker and instructors. While, there is a lack of feedback from Lao students who are the key target in the cultivation program. As the majority of participants in the program, students play an important role to a better program construction whose feedback to the cultivation program could provide specific evidence of its improvement. In order to have a sound evaluation to the cultivation program, the analysis of real feelings from Lao students is needed. Meanwhile, the release of trilingual versions of the cultivation program in Chinese, Lao and English could promote the bilateral understanding of students and teachers.

## **9. Conclusion**

The present study is trying to answer the two research questions that the contribution of the cultivation program to PU's internationalization and weakness and strengths of the Lao student cultivation program through the comparison between the

Lao student cultivation program and its implementation in reality. After interviewing with related participants from different departments, it showed that unmatched between the theoretical cultivation program and its implementation in reality. While, even there were some weaknesses appeared in convergence cultivation after one-year preparatory learning, the cultivation program really did some contribution on internationalization of PU. In order to improve the cultivation program to an effective one, to make a proper cultivation plan for major learning and to have a sound management system are required for future job.

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