



# European students' learning adaptation to socio-cultural interactions in Taiwan

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## Abstract

Taiwan has gained popularity among European university students as an ideal destination in exchange programs. This study aims to compare European students' perceived Chinese cultural values with those of Taiwanese students and to provide a deeper understanding of the cultural and social interactions of European students in Taiwan. A personal survey and in-depth interviews were administered in five major universities in northern, central, and southern part of Taiwan to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data. European students consider few Chinese cultural values like knowledge, kindness, tolerance of others, and harmony with others higher than those of local Taiwanese students. In few traditional Chinese cultural values like gift giving, courtesy, prudence, Taiwanese students value them with higher scores than European students do. With reference to the Chinese culture in particular, European students have to deal with different teaching styles and different norms while communicating with instructors and local students in Taiwan. Five themes were formalized to describe European students' experiences in Taiwan focusing on lifestyles, acculturative stress, learning, language issues, and social interactions with local people. The learning adaptation, individually distinctive, converges to positive experiences through socio-cultural interactions, which makes the experiences valuable and precious. European students do not overlook European ways of engaging with instructors, but they perceived, internalized and demonstrated their learning process in Taiwanese higher education. Cultural interactions enrich teaching and learning environment which benefits European students and Taiwanese students to a great extent.

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## Introduction

When the Bologna Declaration was signed, the barriers of studying abroad were eradicated; students were encouraged to have experiences overseas (Communiqué 2012). Respond to changes, policies, and practices were laid to make institutions and individuals fit successfully into the global academic environment (Altbach and Knight 2007). At present, higher education institutions throughout the world are addressing the international dimension of higher education in a way that reflects their values, priorities, opportunities, and available resources (Pinna 2009).

Recently, Taiwan has gained popularity among European university students as an ideal destination in exchange programs. According to the Taiwan Ministry of Education, the number of international students in Taiwan has increased from fewer than 6000 in the early 1990s to 130,417 in 2019; indeed, in 2019, European students accounted for 47.67% of all foreign exchange students in Taiwan. Ahmad et al. (2016) pointed out that country attractions affect students' study decisions significantly as a pull factor; moreover, socio-cultural diversity makes the cultural experience a key aspect motivating international students to choose Taiwan as their destination (Wang and Chang 2016), bearing in mind that the conceptual bases of societies with different histories and cultures can lead to alternative ways of constructing social reality (Golden 2006). The Chinese language itself has also been increasingly considered of instrumental value, opening up new job/business opportunities and favoring international mobility (Wang and Curdt 2016). Moreover, the economic prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region in the nineties has spread the principles in Confucianism, which is considered one of the Chinese core values and the cultural background conducive for entrepreneurs of this region to excel (Lee 2003).

Culture is a unique mode intertwining behavior, mindset, and perceptions (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952). Chinese culture, in particular, draws on a rich historical and philosophical background, with core values affected by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Such core cultural values influence individuals' mentality and behavior, relationship with others, rites, rituals, religion, food, and education (Mullis 2007; Jin and Dan 2004).

Adaptation to an unfamiliar environment in cross-cultural transition is faced by international students when they are sojourning in a foreign country (Zapf 1991), and socio-cultural adjustment is needed particularly with reference to perceived cultural distance (Yu 2010). According to Ward and Kennedy (1999), socio-cultural adaptation is a series of behaviors to learn and interact with the society to fit in a new culture, and international students who have the better ability of understanding the local language and culture result from better socio-cultural adaptation (Kanchanaprapas 2019). Despite considerable academic research on international students' cross-cultural learning, most studies have paid attention to English-speaking countries, with special reference to the USA, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand (Araujo 2011; Chirkov et al. 2008; Kambouropoulos 2014; Lillyman and Bennett 2014; Yang 1987).

Mann et al. (1998) use the conflict model as the conceptual framework and the Melbourne Decision Making Questionnaire, including decision-making of

vigilance, defensive avoidance, and hypervigilance, to evaluate decision making patterns in six countries, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Mann et al. (1998) conclude that Asian students tend to be defensive avoidant and hypervigilant. Wang and Lin (2019) explain the need for research in the area of international students perceived traditional Chinese values in education while studying in China. Their findings reveal the Confucian heritage culture is respected by international students regarding values in education. Taiwan has yet to be studied as a destination for European students with reference to their learning and adaptation to Chinese socio-cultural values; however, with an increasing number of European students in Taiwan, such aspect is definitely worth examining. Research questions raised for this study are that whether European students perceive Chinese cultural values differently from Taiwanese students. Furthermore, what would be difficulties European students have encountered after arriving in Taiwan for their study. The present study aims (a) to compare European students' perceived Chinese cultural values with those of Taiwanese students and (b) to provide a deeper understanding of the cultural and social interactions of European students in Taiwan.

## Data and methodology

Culture is considered a collective set of values shared by groups of human beings. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) posited that culture consists of patterned ways of thinking, feeling, and reacting and that it takes shape in symbols and traditions related to sets of values. With reference to the etic point of view, the content of human values from Schwartz (1992), cultural dimensions from Hofstede (1984), and Rokeach's Value Survey (RVS) from Rokeach (1973) all develop the framework from a cross-cultural perspective. In turn, the Chinese Value Survey (CVS) from the Chinese Culture Connection (1987) is widely exploited in the analysis of Chinese societies from the etic point of view.

According to Hofstede (1984), culture involves power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, and masculinity-femininity (Hofstede and Bond 1988). Developing specific structures of perceived Chinese values that are distinct from those of western culture and are not covered in Hofstede's cultural dimensions was suggested. Michael Bond along with few scholars organized the Chinese Culture Connection (1987) and generated the Chinese Value Survey (CVS). Chinese Culture Connection has challenged Hofstede's cultural values (Yang 1987) by positing that some valuable dimensions might be invisible in Western perspectives. Therefore, it attempts to develop a measurement that reflects Chinese cultural values as well, that is, the Chinese Value Survey (CVS). In the CVS, there are 40 items which illustrate the lifestyle and the perspectives in Chinese societies. Although the contemporary education system in Taiwan has been influenced by western culture, Chinese people still view harmony, saving face, and respect for scholars as important in modern Chinese society (Jin and Dan 2004)

A personal survey and in-depth interviews were exploited to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data for examining European students' perceived Chinese cultural

values in Taiwan. In the first place, a personal survey was administered. Samples of the quantitative data consist of two groups of people. The first group includes European students who studied at universities in Taiwan at the time of the Survey (2017). The second group includes local Taiwanese students. Surveys were administered in five major universities in the northern, central, and southern part of Taiwan, including National Taiwan University (NTU), National Cheng Chi University (NCCU), National Chung Hsing University (NCHU), National Cheng Kung University (NCKU), and National Sun Yat-sen University (NSYSU). Trained surveyors had initiated survey requests through International Offices at selected universities, and then personally reached out to European students at social events or after classes on campuses. All of the surveys were administered in English for European students. For local Taiwanese students, questionnaires were in Chinese. Back translation was applied for accuracy in wording/meaning in two versions of questionnaires.

A total of 119 EU students were personally surveyed and 116 valid samples were produced, while 131 were the valid samples of local Taiwanese students. A gift worth USD 3 was provided as a reward for each respondent participating in the survey. Participants were asked to answer the questions based on their personal experiences. The survey is made of CVS items, open-ended questions, and demographics. Students from sixteen European countries were included, which are Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and the UK. More than half of the respondents were from Germany and France; this is because students from these two countries account for more than a half of total European students in Taiwan (Ministry of Education, 2020). Demographics of surveyed European respondents are listed in Table 1. They were from 18 different European countries, and the majority of them (88.8%) had not lived in Chinese societies before coming to Taiwan. Demographics of surveyed Taiwanese students are listed in Table 2. The majority of respondents (90.8%) had not lived in European societies before participating in the survey. To measure differences in perceived Chinese cultural values between European and Taiwanese students in Taiwan, 40 items of CVS from Chinese Culture Connection (1987) were used (Appendix Table 7), with six-point Likert scale from 1 to 6, 1 indicating “strongly disagree,” while 6 “strongly agree.” Open-ended questions were also provided with reference to the student’s awareness of Chinese culture and the importance of having cultural experiences.

Secondly, in-depth interviews were carried out to further explore European students’ perceived Chinese cultural values in Taiwan. Students from European countries and those who had lived in Taiwan for at least 2 months qualified as interviewees. The total number of interviewees was 12. Six of them were from Germany, two from Finland, one from Spain, one from the Netherlands, one from Sweden, and one from Switzerland (Table 3). Milena et al. (2008) suggested that when testing motivation, beliefs, and point of views, qualitative research is a preferable method.

Potential interviewees were reached for permission to be interviewed individually; upon obtaining consensuses, in-depth interviews were recorded using electronic devices. The interviewees were able to express their own perceptions freely and frankly and the duration of the interviews was around 35–45 min. After the interview, a gift worth approximately USD 5 was provided as a reward. In order to ensure accuracy, the transcripts were checked by the researcher and then e-mailed to each interviewee for

**Table 1** Demographics of surveyed European students ( $N=116$ )

Item	<i>N</i>	Percentage (%)
Gender (%)		
Male	67	57.8
Female	49	42.2
Nationality (%)		
Belgium	5	4.3
Croatia	1	0.9
Czech Republic	14	12.1
Estonia	1	0.9
France	22	19.0
Germany	43	37.1
Italy	4	3.4
Poland	3	2.6
Portugal	2	1.7
Slovakia	1	0.9
Slovenia	1	0.9
Spain	1	0.9
Sweden	3	2.6
Switzerland	1	0.9
the Netherlands	10	8.6
the UK	4	3.4
Level of study (%)		
Undergraduate	47	40.5
Master's	69	59.5
Length of staying (%)		
1~6 months	95	81.9
7~12 months	14	12.1
1.1 year~ 1.5 years	2	1.7
1.6 years~2 years	5	4.3
Once lived in Chinese society (%)		
No	103	88.8
Yes	13	11.2
Universities where survey was taken place (%)		
NCCU	20	17.2
NCHU	16	13.8
NCKU	12	10.3
NSYSU	34	29.3
NTU	34	29.3

examination and confirmation. A slightly higher percentage of male than female respondents was recorded in the dataset; specifically, male respondents account for 57.8% of the European students and for 57.3% of the Taiwanese students.

**Table 2** Demographics of surveyed Taiwanese students ( $N=131$ )

Item	<i>N</i>	Percentage (%)
Gender (%)		
Male	75	57.3
Female	56	42.7
Level of study (%)		
Undergraduate	89	67.9
Master's	41	31.3
Once lived in European societies (%)		
No	119	90.8
Yes	12	9.2
Universities where survey was taken place (%)		
NCCU	23	17.6
NCHU	27	20.6
NCKU	9	6.9
NSYSU	36	27.5
NTU	36	27.5

## Results

### Differences in perceived Chinese cultural values

This study examines European students' perceived Chinese cultural values while studying in Taiwan. Differences in perceived Chinese cultural values are compared with those of local Taiwanese students. For the European samples, qualified respondents are students from European countries who are enrolled in universities in Taiwan

**Table 3** Demographics of interviewees

Interviewees	Gender	Nationality	Level of study
1C	Female	Germany	Master's
1E	Female	Finland	Undergraduate
1P	Male	Switzerland	Master's
1K	Female	Germany	Undergraduate
1R	Female	Germany	Master's
2R	Female	Germany	Master's
1M	Male	Germany	Master's
1U	Female	Germany	Master's
1T	Male	Spain	Undergraduate
1S	Male	Finland	Undergraduate
2S	Male	The Netherland	Undergraduate
2E	Male	Sweden	Undergraduate

in 2017; for the Taiwanese samples, qualified respondents are students who are studying in universities. Total valid samples are 246, of 116 samples from European countries and 131 samples from Taiwan.

Differences in perceived Chinese cultural values between European students and Taiwanese students are listed in Table 3. Statistically, significant differences are examined using *t* tests. European students consider few Chinese cultural values like knowledge, kindness, tolerance of others, and harmony with others higher than those of local Taiwanese students. In few traditional Chinese cultural values like gift-giving, courtesy, and prudence, Taiwanese students value them with higher scores than European students do (Table 4).

To explore sub-scales (dimensions) of perceived Chinese cultural values, factor analysis is applied. The datasets of European and Taiwanese students are analyzed separately, and the results of factorized cultural values are listed in Table 5 and Table 6. For the European dataset, 26 out of 40 items with loadings greater than 0.40, with 50.83% of the variance in total is expounded by five factors in five dimensions. Five factors of the European dataset are named "traditions and loyalty," "harmony and solidarity," "persistence," "self-controlled," and "reliability" (Table 4). For the Taiwanese dataset, 36 out of 40 items with loading greater than 0.40. Five dimensions are extracted and can explain 53.16% of the variance in total. Five factors of the Taiwanese dataset are named "loyalty and conservative," "relationships with others and self-cultivation," "integrity and self-controlled," "harmony," and "saving face" (Table 5). According to Hair et al. (2011), the value of Cronbach's alpha higher than 0.60 implies a sufficient level of internal consistency in exploratory research. In the Taiwanese dataset, three out of five factors with Cronbach's alpha higher than 0.70. Two out of five factors with Cronbach's alpha higher than 0.60. In the European dataset, Cronbach's alpha of two out of five factors is higher than 0.70. Three out of five factors with Cronbach's alpha close to 0.60. Both results of datasets show that five factors with sufficient internal consistency.

Based on factorized results, European students perceive Chinese cultural values in different constructs than Taiwanese students do. However, some similarities can be revealed in the results. First, loyalty is considered an important Chinese cultural value emphasized by both European and Taiwanese students. Second, harmony and relationships with others are also stressed by both European and Taiwanese students, but at different ranks. Third, the saving face has been a traditional Chinese aspect in cultural values, which European students do not value as much as Taiwanese students do.

## Mobility

Experiencing cultural differences can be an important reason to attract European students to study in Taiwan. In the in-depth interviews, and all respondents mentioned "cultural differences" as what attracted them most to apply for studying abroad, as shown in (1):

1. "I wanted to have different sight of the world and different cultures. Things may (be) going on in Asia, and so I can compare it with Europe. What the different ways may be...I think the easiest way is to live in their culture and get a lot of things from their mind or how they think about things."

**Table 4** Differences in Chinese cultural values between European and Taiwanese students

Variables	Taiwanese students	SD	European students	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> value
1. Filial piety	5.22	.71	4.38	1.07	7.12	<.0001***
2. Reciprocation of greetings and favors, gifts	5.23	.66	4.63	.97	5.58	<.0001***
3. Humbleness	5.15	.70	4.85	1.02	2.65	0.0086***
4. Knowledge (education)	5.03	.77	5.50	.64	-5.22	<.0001***
5. Industry (working hard)	5.07	.75	4.85	.82	2.15	0.0323**
6. Kindness (forgiveness, compassion)	5.09	.76	5.36	.72	-2.88	0.0043***
7. Tolerance of others	4.48	.89	5.43	.85	-8.60	<.0001***
8. Harmony with others	4.50	.90	5.19	.86	-6.18	<.0001***
9. Observation of rites and rituals	4.78	.801	3.87	1.19	6.92	<.0001***
10. Loyalty to superiors	4.11	.95	4.17	1.10	-0.38	0.7010
11. Solidarity with others	4.93	.83	4.88	.79	0.51	0.6081
12. Personal steadiness and stability	5.14	.77	4.81	.91	3.04	0.0027***
13. Sense of righteousness	4.91	.89	4.68	.96	1.96	0.0517*
14. Patriotism	3.85	1.19	3.21	1.27	4.03	<.0001***
15. Moderation, following the middle way	4.32	1.16	4.16	1.06	1.16	0.2465
16. Resistance to corruption	5.02	.88	5.35	.85	-3.07	0.0024***
17. Self-cultivation	5.40	.68	5.14	.82	2.70	0.0074***
18. Ordering relationships by status	4.02	1.23	3.18	1.37	5.02	<.0001***
19. Non-competitiveness	2.94	1.19	3.20	1.19	-1.71	0.0888*
20. Benevolent authority	4.37	1.19	3.86	1.17	3.42	0.0007***
21. Sincerity	5.29	.71	5.09	.76	2.09	0.0380**
22. Adaptability	5.47	.56	5.15	.77	3.68	0.0003***
23. Patience	5.37	.65	4.95	.94	4.09	<.0001***
24. Trustworthiness	5.66	.52	5.25	.80	4.66	<.0001***
25. Keeping oneself disinterested and pure	4.31	1.06	3.47	1.28	5.48	<.0001***
26. Prudence (carefulness)	5.10	.71	4.30	.87	7.81	<.0001***
27. Thrift	4.59	.89	3.99	1.10	4.56	<.0001***
28. Persistence (perseverance)	5.44	.65	4.83	.84	6.38	<.0001***
29. A sense of cultural superiority	3.92	1.23	3.12	1.47	4.59	<.0001***
30. Repayment of both the good and the evil	3.47	1.30	3.02	1.32	2.68	0.0078***
31. Having a sense of shame	4.79	.87	3.84	.99	7.96	<.0001***
32. Having few desires	3.82	1.21	3.70	1.35	0.74	0.4616
33. Protecting your "face"	3.55	1.08	3.65	1.26	-0.62	0.5384
34. Wealth	4.43	1.02	3.87	1.19	3.91	0.0001***
35. Courtesy	5.22	.74	4.72	.94	4.59	<.0001***
36. Respect of tradition	3.36	1.07	4.22	1.15	-6.06	<.0001***
37. Contentedness with one's position in life	3.76	1.18	3.90	1.09	-1.01	0.3148
38. Being conservative	2.56	1.09	2.64	1.27	-0.57	0.5700
39. Chastity in women	2.92	1.43	2.38	1.47	2.91	0.0039***
40. A close, intimate friend	5.32	.75	5.18	.84	1.37	0.1713

\*\*\*Indicates significant at 0.01 significance level, \*\*indicates significant at 0.05 significance level, \*indicates significant at 0.1 significance level



**Table 5** Factorized Chinese cultural values of European students

	Factor one Traditions and loyalty	Factor two Harmony and solidarity	Factor three Persistence	Factor four Self-controlled	Factor five Reliability
Respect of tradition	0.77				
Observation of rites and rituals	0.71				
Industry	0.69				
Loyalty to superiors	0.67				
Being conservative	0.64				
Patriotism	0.54				
Tolerance of others		0.66			
Kindness		0.66			
Humbleness		0.65			
Solidarity with others		0.63			
Non-competitiveness		0.60			
Harmony with others		0.53			
Sense of righteousness		0.50			
Patience		0.41			
Persistence			0.77		
Adaptability			0.68		
Self-cultivation			0.64		
Thrift			0.45		
A sense of cultural superiority				0.65	
Repayment of the good/the evil				0.60	
Keeping oneself disinterested				0.54	
Having few desires				0.49	
Chastity in women				0.47	
Trustworthiness					0.70
Courtesy					0.66
Sincerity					0.55
Cronbach's alpha	0.75	0.73	0.57	0.58	0.62
Variance explained (%)	17.38	12.13	8.77	6.64	5.90

A second pull factor is “having the uniqueness” for studying in Taiwan; indeed, many European students consider this experience “special” and “unique:”

2. “Taiwan until today is not very popular, I would say in Europe. I really like the idea that going to a country that is so diverse and so colorful and so special. I mean everybody or someone has been to China, so I am very glad I have an opportunity to go to Taiwan. It is something unique and special.”

As shown in (2), when comparing themselves to other students back in their home country, the interviewees reported that not many Europeans know much about Taiwan, which makes them curious and eager to experience this “mysterious” place.

**Table 6** Factorized Chinese cultural values of Taiwanese students

	Factor one Loyalty and conservative	Factor two Relationship with others and self-cultivation	Factor three Integrity and self-controlled	Factor four Harmony	Factor five Saving face
Being conservative	0.78				
Chastity in women	0.73				
Contentedness with one's position	0.70				
Having few desires	0.67				
Respect of tradition	0.66				
Ordering relationships by status	0.65				
Loyalty to superiors	0.64				
Keeping oneself disinterested	0.59				
Sense of righteousness	0.48				
Patriotism	0.47				
Adaptability				0.79	
Patience				0.68	
A close, intimate friend				0.66	
Trustworthiness				0.64	
Reciprocation of greetings / favors				0.62	
Sincerity				0.57	
Self-cultivation				0.57	
Courtesy				0.57	
Filial piety				0.49	
Having a sense of shame				0.44	
Humbleness				0.42	
Industry				0.41	

Table 6 (continued)

	Factor one Loyalty and conservative	Factor two Relationship with others and self-cultivation	Factor three Integrity and self-controlled	Factor four Harmony	Factor five Saving face
Thrift			0.71		
Prudence			0.69		
Persistence			0.61		
Non-competitiveness			0.55		
Kindness			0.47		
Personal steadiness and stability			0.47	0.74	
Tolerance of others				0.73	
Harmony with others				0.53	
Non-competitiveness				0.50	
Observation of rites and rituals					0.72
Wealth					0.70
Repayment of the good/the evil					0.68
Protecting your "face"					0.56
A sense of cultural superiority	0.87	0.87	0.79	0.68	0.66
Cronbach's alpha	26.75	10.91	6.22	5.14	4.14
Variance explained (%)					

## Academic learning

Academic learning is one thing international students have to adapt to while living in a different culture. With reference to the Chinese culture, in particular, European students have to deal with different teaching styles and different norms while communicating with professors and local students in Taiwan. In particular, handling assignments is an issue faced by most of the European students in Taiwan. In the interviews, some of the interviewees recall that they had imagined the academic load would be heavier than in Europe. In Europe, students usually have examinations at the end of each semester, while in Taiwan, they need to hand in hard-copied reports/assignments, deliver presentations, and take examinations each month or several times per semester. Interviewees also explain they feel “exhausted” and “tired” due to presentations and assignments:

3. “Here, you have a lot of works during the semester. That’s pretty new, but sometimes exhausted. We have to write a lot of assignments.”

Most of the interviewees agree that they gain generic skills from doing assignments as a result of this new learning approach. One student even gained confidence in doing presentations; she explained it was a challenge at the beginning of the semester, but she adjusted her frame of mind to the new situation. The implication is that European students have learned to be “academically persistent:”

4. “That’s a new learning approach. We all feel how we learn throughout the semester.”

“It’s quite a new challenge for us that we have so many assignments and presentations. Especially presentations, we had so many presentations at the beginning. I also have to say I got better at presentations.”

Courtesy needs to be understood by European students when communicating with people who have higher social status in Taiwan, although some interviewed European students pointed out that they had already expected the “power distance” could be larger than in their home countries. European students understand habits and values are different and learn that “if you start criticizing professors, it would be offensive and very impolite.” One respondent described the situation as follows:

5. “We really feel in some classes that teachers or professors are not used to students have different opinions or criticism. That was something I really confused at the beginning.”

When adjusting to social norms of manners in interacting with people of higher social status in Taiwan, European students develop methods to communicate with professors to avoid misunderstandings. Example (6) shows how European students interact with professors inoffensively:

6. "...when it's not the way or not the opinion that the professor shared, we put it in a very very polite context and use a lot additional words to make sure that it's totally polite and not interpret as an offense or something." "You have to be respectful, you should be modest. And I like this! I really like this approach. But sometimes it's difficult, because we are just used to different ways."

Professors in Taiwan may realize that European students tend to voice personal ideas or opinions directly in classes. Therefore, professors themselves gradually adjust to understand different opinions raised by European students. Both professors and European students develop a moderate way to interact with each other:

7. "It was difficult to adapt to this, but I think we kind of found a way now. Like...in the middle. They adapt to us and we adapt to them. I think we are getting better now."

Group work in classroom can be a new learning style for European students; interviewees explain that they have to participate in team works such as presentations, group discussions, and in field trips:

8. "That is something that is really new for us, especially all the group work. But I think it is a very interesting experience because all these groups are mostly mixed. We all have to adapt again..."

In the group work in class, one interviewee indicated being harmonic and supportive with team members are emphasized in Taiwan; this is because conformity is important in Chinese culture. Sometimes, individuals need to compromise in order to get along with other team members (Hsu and Huang 2016).

An interesting phenomenon revealed by this study is that European students may act differently when they interact with other European students or with local Taiwanese students. For example, one European student remarks that she tries to be more polite while talking to Taiwanese classmates because "moderation" and "harmony" are emphasized in Chinese culture:

9. "My interaction, I would say it's a bit more polite. I always try not to say something wrong, so I would be more polite than when I talk to German colleagues.... I just aware of what I am saying that I don't say anything wrong."

Finally, "protecting one's face" represents a cultural difference as pointed out by an interviewee, who compares two different acting styles between the Germans and the Taiwanese:

10. "...saving face. That's a bit difficult for us as German. If there is a group work, and you think one person might not going to work on the direction. In Germany, we would say 'Hey, don't do like that. Let's do in this way.' But in Asia, it's more like that letting oneself lose his face."

## Language issues

Mandarin is the language used to communicate in Taiwan. For the European students interviewed, the language barrier has been one major difficulty when interacting with local people; indeed, all the interviewees pointed out that they could not handle Mandarin very well. This is one main issue that makes it difficult for them to adapt to the host environment and that makes them feel “lonely” and “isolated” when classmates speak Mandarin only:

11. “Also, a lot of people when they talk to me, they don’t really know the words (in English). They are always switching back to Chinese. Especially when I am together with my roommate, they all speak in Chinese, and I am the only one who doesn’t understand.”

Interviewees also report that they attend Chinese courses at universities in Taiwan; however, learning four different tones in Chinese turns out to be a big challenge (12) and tones confuse foreign students while learning Chinese, especially with reference to the correct pronunciation of words (13):

12. “The tones are hard for me. To hear them and to speak in the right tone. It is really hard for me. The four tones when you go up and down.”

13. “It is actually the pronunciation of different sounds. Like... all these, for Europeans may feel you just have nine different ways to say the same thing... In all European languages, you just learn a word like this, and you don’t put focus on the tone itself. Here, it is just like you always pronounce the tone in the correct way. Otherwise, it would mean something totally different.”

When it comes to communicating with local students, eleven of thirteen respondents imply that they had experiences of interacting with local Taiwanese students in the classroom. Six out of eleven respondents mention they eager to talk to local students. One of the respondents mentioned that “Taiwanese students will stick together more” in the class.

14. The relationships with the classmates (are) just ok. I don’t really have so much interaction with them. Just normal conversation, small talk. I don’t really often hang out with my classmates. Maybe just for some chat and for a lunch.

In the university, communicating with professors and local students is inevitable. Most of students indicate that they ask for help when they need it. Three of respondents referred the professor is helpful. One respondent attends a class taught in Chinese. She said she got a lot of help from the professor. She expressed how kind the professor is and showed gratefulness to the professor. According to her response, the professor provides materials for her special needs so that European students adjust to the class better.

15. There is one professor (who) is really nice and helpful. She translates for me. Always giving me a hand in English. She has a lot of work because of me. Sometimes I also think that the class or she can't really talk about all the topics because she always has to translate for me what they are talking about. Of course, that takes time.

The language barrier occurs not only in the classroom but also in daily life. Therefore, a range of strategies are developed to adapt to the environment, like using Google translate on cell phones; some interviewees even resort to gestures to communicate with the Taiwanese who do not understand English:

16. "Sometimes I try to ask, and maybe we use sounds and hands to try to show what I want."  
 "After all it didn't matter so much because we were kind of communicating with our hands and feet."

## Lifestyles

All the interviewees point out that they enjoy their time in Taiwan and are aware of how different the Chinese culture is. In comparison with their home culture, differences include cheapness, food, traffic, religion, sports, night markets, and rituals. Most interviewees show respect for traditional food and activities:

17. "I will miss a lot of things (when I go back home), the street food, 7-11 (convenient stores), which is 24 hours open. We don't really have that in our country."

Food—which is itself part of culture—is among the most typical differences; European students enjoy "eating out" in Taiwan because they can try different local food items:

18. "I really like the lifestyle that it's really easy to live here. I really like. You always eat out and not cooking at home."

Moreover, with long working hours in Taiwan, getting ready-to-eat meals has become a phenomenon. Since Taiwan ranks the fifth longest working hours in the world, under this circumstance, convenience and efficiency are emphasized. Most of the interviewees claim they eat local Taiwanese food more often than Western food:

19. "The Taiwanese food is very good. The traditional one."

"I would like to say all rice with vegetables in Taiwan is good. Taiwan has really good vegetables. I like tofu as well."

One interviewee reports that they have changed her eating habits. When first arrived, they favor Western food; then, after a while, they gradually adjust to local food culture. In addition, food is also a glue connecting friends and family (Warden & Chen 2009).

Indeed, a Swiss student told the researcher that he admired Taiwanese diet, since the way people share food with each other is a symbol of “caring for other people:”

20. “This is also what I really like here that people here share all the dishes. There have many plates, and everybody just take the meal from them. In Europe, you have your own plate... I think sharing is caring. You have more interaction when you share.”

Night markets are unique in Taiwan. All interviewees said they had been to night markets and expressed the enjoyable connection between local Taiwanese food, shopping, and having fun. This points to European students being interested in Taiwanese traditions and easily adapting to traditional street food culture:

21. “And night markets. I like them a lot. I like the atmosphere there. It’s a place that people go and gather together. Trying food or shopping. Something fun that people do together.”

“I love night markets. I like these stands, like they fried tofu and vegetables and so on.”

Except for food and convenience in Taiwan, European students are also curious about religions. In general, the traditional religions in Taiwan are Taoism, Buddhism, and folk religions. Taoism sheds light on human and nature, whereas the folk religion is a mixture of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. In Taiwan, religions are significantly affected by Confucianism (Chang 2010). A German respondent explained her personal affection on going to temples:

22. “I like to go to the temple to see people pray. That’s something so different from my home country.”

### **Social interaction with locals**

European students are eager to make local friends and enjoy interacting with local people in Taiwan. Therefore, interviewees explain that they take part in buddy programs and host family programs. Attending these programs helps students adapt to social and academic environment during their stay in Taiwan. Several interviewees indicate that they spend their leisure time with their host families because it is a way to have a glimpse of Taiwanese family lifestyles. A German interviewee remarks that staying with locals makes her understand differences and be more willing to try new things:

23. “When I travel with my Taiwanese friends, it’s not only with them, but it’s with the whole family. It’s just like living with the real Taiwanese family. I like that a lot... You learn all kinds of culture. For example, what kind of snacks they eat, like the dry squid, but they also eat snickers.”



Undoubtedly, making friends with locals helps European students learn more about Taiwan and experience this country in different ways from just being tourists. One interviewee even says travelling with her Taiwanese friends was the best part of her sojourn:

24. "I mean I do like traveling of course, especially with my Taiwanese friends. I love traveling. They took me to places with the car where I can't go with the public transportation. Travelling with my Taiwanese friends is probably the best part. They can show me places that usually tourists don't go to..."

Interviewees also remark that they feel comfortable with people in the host country and praise locals who are willing to help people and show kindness to strangers (25) and a Finnish interviewee in particular tells the researcher that local residents are warm-hearted and helpful and when she encounters problems local residents are ready to provide solutions for her (26):

25. "Taiwanese people are quite helpful. They want to help you. Anyone nearby hears that you speak English. If someone who doesn't speak English, they call someone else for help. Or they might just come to help you even without asking."

26. "Just like seeing the views and traveling with other people. We also experience how friendly people are in Taiwan. We stayed in the hostel, and we wanted to go to the mountain, but there's no public transportation to the mountain. We were also not able to rent a car. The hostel owner's father drove us around to the mountain. That was really friendly."

In turn, a German student provides a comparison between the Taiwanese and the Germans in terms of her experiences focusing on how "caring" and "loving" Taiwanese locals are:

27. "One of my friend's mom, she always buys me fresh fruits because she knows I don't go to the market here. She brings me mangoes, apples and everything. I just overwhelmed because I feel like she's my mom. It's so nice. That's very unique. In Germany, people are friendly, but I don't think they will do that much."

A traditional Chinese idiom goes "Goose feather sent from afar, a trifling present with a weighty thought behind it," which means that a present may not be valuable but the careful thoughts behind it are priceless. In Chinese societies, sharing even simple things is common. All the abovementioned comments testify to the fact that having good interactions with local residents assists adaptation to the host country for European students.

### **Acculturative stress**

Living in an unfamiliar environment, culture shock is inevitable (Furnham and Bochner 1982). Several interviewees agreed that the first two weeks were hard for them in terms

of accommodation, class enrollment, and sanitation. One Spanish student explains the condition in a sharing room in dormitory:

28. “So that is a kind of shock for me to live with more people in the same room. They also share the toilet. It’s not a toilet. I have never seen that. I don’t know how to use it. I don’t know. That was a kind of shock to live there. ... Now I like it. The beginning was hard, but once you adjust there, you just like everything there. Now I feel it’s my home. I live there. It’s fine.”

One German student admires the Taiwanese recycling system and tries to explain why the Taiwanese government avoids placing trash cans on the street:

29. “At the beginning, it was like...um...that’s weird, where do we put our garbage? But then after a while, it makes sense. You separate the garbage very strictly, which is great. So you can’t just put a garbage can into the classroom because you can’t separate them... I think it’s really awesome.”

To summarize the manifold cultural experiences of European students in Taiwan, five main themes—“learning,” “lifestyles,” “social interaction with locals,” “acculturative stress,” and “language issues”—have been identified in in-depth interviews. The socio-cultural interactions with Taiwanese alleviate European students’ adaptation in Taiwan. Overall, findings from the interviews testify to the fact that European students are motivated to choose Taiwan as a destination in experiencing Chinese culture.

Academically, European students perceived higher level of power distance in Taiwan than in their home countries. This is certainly because respecting and giving obedience to seniority are emphasized by Confucianism. Furthermore, “harmony” and “tolerance to others” are frequently found in group works in interviews, where European students indicate that their Taiwanese homologs tend to follow ostensible peace to avoid conflicts. European students tend to communicate with others in a pluralistic and consensual way, which means that they pay more attention to “having harmony,” and agreements are built on not disturbing peace (McLeod and Chaffee 1972).

## Discussion

This study provides a better understanding of sojourning issues based on Chinese cultural values. The study compares perceived Chinese cultural values between European students and Taiwanese students. Quantitative results show that there is a divergence between these two groups of students. European students consider few Chinese cultural values like knowledge, kindness, tolerance of others, and harmony with others higher than those of local Taiwanese students. In few traditional Chinese cultural values like gift-giving, courtesy, and prudence, Taiwanese students value them with higher scores than European students do. Based on the results of factor analysis, European students view Chinese cultural values in different constructs than Taiwanese students do. Loyalty is considered an important Chinese cultural value emphasized by both

European and Taiwanese students. Practical implications are that loyalty can be considered a common cultural value emphasized by young people of different backgrounds. Harmony and relationships with others are stressed by both European and Taiwanese students. This finding reflects that conflict avoidance has been a major cultural value in Chinese societies, which in reality is one of the core values sustaining families and societies. Unsurprisingly, the saving face has been valued by Taiwanese students but not by European students, indicating that face value is still deeply rooted in the young generation in Taiwan.

With a soaring number of European students traveling to Taiwan, it is essential to know how European students learn to adapt to cultural and social interactions in Taiwan. The contribution of the present study is two-folded. In the first place, we intended to identify differences in perceived Chinese cultural values between European and Taiwanese students. Taiwanese universities that receive international students from European countries can benefit from these findings to better prepare instructors and students to reduce misunderstandings and potential conflicts. Taiwanese universities can educate incoming European students about academic rites and rituals in orientations, letting European students understand what cultural differences they need to adapt to during their stay in Taiwan. Indeed, as indicated in Kondakci et al. (2008), the adaptability of foreign students to local conditions is only one part of internationalization, the role local students and faculty play has equal importance in different dimensions of internationalization. Secondly, we aimed at providing detailed feelings and feedbacks of European students in Taiwan for European universities which collaborate with Taiwanese universities to better equip students for their study journey in Taiwan. We suggest European universities equipping European students with similarities and differences in perceived Chinese cultural values for those who are preparing for their educational opportunities in Taiwan. Indeed, as shown in this study, for most European students' knowledge of Chinese culture is deviated and culture shock frequently occurs at the beginning of their stay. Providing European students pre-departure supports would benefit them to a great extent.

Different cultural experiences are often leading motivations for European students traveling to Asia. They are enthusiastic to learn academically; however, they may not have a comprehensive understanding of cultural differences during socio-cultural interactions with locals. Based on findings in this study, overall evaluations of European students' learning adaptation in Taiwan are positive, with the critical component being socio-cultural interactions. Findings in this study contribute to the existing literature in revealing similarities and differences in perceived Chinese cultural values from young European students in Taiwan and those of local Taiwanese students.

## Implications and conclusion

The research brings implications for higher education. First, Taiwan is a small island and may stand for its uniqueness in attracting European students for exchange programs, degree-seeking programs, or language training. European students are aware

of cultural differences during their stay in Taiwan. The learning adaptation, individually distinctive, converges to positive experiences through socio-cultural interactions. This indicates that even with challenges, European students have the competence to overcome difficulties in adaptation.

Secondly, Chinese culture has a rich historical and philosophical background with core values affected by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Core cultural values cannot be effusively taught in classrooms. European students' cultural experiences in Taiwan are mainly from interactions with professors, classmates, friends, and the locals, which makes the experiences valuable and precious. European students view Chinese cultural values differently from local Taiwanese students. For example, European students may not be familiar with certain traditional cultural aspects. Saving face is a typical example that European students do not emphasize as much as Taiwanese students do. In a practical way, the conservativeness of Taiwanese students would have been interpreted as shyness, especially in the classroom where local students do not proactively interact with European students. Instructors in Taiwan need to explain conservativeness in perceived Chinese culture to European students and the rationales behind the saving face of Taiwanese students.

Thirdly, for Taiwanese universities, it is better to educate incoming European students about academic rites and rituals in orientations. Letting international students understand what they would encounter during their stay in Taiwan. With mentality, depression and misunderstanding would be reduced. The majority of European students willing to spend a certain amount of time studying in Taiwan are aware of cultural differences. Chinese culture is one attraction for

Acculturation is a complex process. For Taiwanese faculties, it is crucial to understand students' needs and wants so that they are able to develop better strategies to help students fit into the host environment. With this study, Taiwanese faculties are able to understand what international students are sensitive to. Realizing differences in social norms and culture, Taiwanese universities are able to handle students' requests. European students do not overlook European ways of engaging with local teachers, but they perceived, internalized, and demonstrated their learning process in Taiwanese higher education. Cultural interactions enrich the teaching and learning environment which benefits European students and Taiwanese students to a great extent.

Undoubtedly, European students are a broad concept, and students from different European countries may think and act differently. Hence, further research is needed in this field, particularly with reference to the diversification of European students, so as to focus on specific countries and compare perceived cultural values of European students in Asian countries. Furthermore, this study is administered on campuses. Although some cultural values and interactions among European students and Taiwanese students are important for educational purposes, findings in this study can be extended to multinational companies with European employees in Chinese societies. This area has not been exclusively discussed in the literature and is worth looking into in further research.

## Appendix

**Table 7** Statement development from CVS

Items from CVS	Statement developed in questionnaires
1. Filial piety	I think Filial piety is important.
2. Reciprocation of greetings and favors, gifts.	I think repaying favors and giving gifts reciprocally is important.
3. Humbleness	I think being humble is important.
4. Knowledge (Education)	I think being educated is important.
5. Industry (Working hard)	I think working hard is important.
6. Kindness (Forgiveness, compassion)	I think kindness is important.
7. Tolerance of others	I think being tolerant to others is important.
8. Harmony with others	I think living in harmony with others is important.
9. Observation of rites and rituals	I think observing rites and rituals is important.
10. Loyalty to superiors	I think having loyalty to superiors is important.
11. Solidarity with others	I think working solidarity with others is important.
12. Personal steadiness and stability	I think personal steadiness and stability is important.
13. Sense of righteousness	I think righteousness is important.
14. Patriotism	I think patriotism is important.
15. Moderation, following the middle way	I think moderation while doing things is important.
16. Resistance to corruption	I think resistance to corruption is important.
17. Self-cultivation	I think self-cultivation is important.
18. Ordering relationships by status and observing this order	I think ordering relationships by status and observing this order is important.
19. Non-competitiveness	I think being non-competitive is important.
20. Benevolent authority	I think benevolent authority is important.
21. Sincerity	I think sincerity is important.
22. Adaptability	I think the adaptability to environment is important.
23. Patience	I think having patience is important.
24. Trustworthiness	I think trustworthiness is important.
25. Keeping oneself disinterested and pure	I think keeping oneself disinterested and pure is important.
26. Prudence (Carefulness)	I think prudence (carefulness) is important while doing things.
27. Thrift	I think being thrifty is important.
28. Persistence (Perseverance)	I think persistence (perseverance) is important.
29. A sense of cultural superiority	I think having a sense of cultural superiority is important.
30. Repayment of both the good and the evil that another person has caused you	I think repaying both the good and the evil that another person has caused me is important.
31. Having a sense of shame	I think having a sense of shame is important.
32. Having few desires	I think having few desires is important.
33. Protecting your "face"	I think protecting one's "face" is important.
34. Wealth	I think having wealth is important.
35. Courtesy	I think courtesy is important.
36. Respect of tradition	I think respecting to tradition is important.

**Table 7** (continued)

Items from CVS	Statement developed in questionnaires
37. Contentedness with one's position in life	I think contenting with one's position in life is important.
38. Being conservative	I think being conservative is important.
39. Chastity in women	I think chastity is important to women.
40. A close, intimate friend	I think having a close and intimate friend is important.

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**Data availability** All of the data and research material are available upon request.

**Code availability** The SAS and SPSS software are used in analyzing research data.

## Declarations

**Ethics approval and consent to participate** Ethical approval was not sought for the present study because all of the survey and interviews were strictly anonymous. No minors were included in the study. Authors of this study do not collect or store identifiable data. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all survey respondents and interviewees before the study.

**Consent for publication** (a) Neither the article nor portions of it have been previously published elsewhere, (b) the manuscript is not under consideration for publication in another journal, and (c) all authors consent to the publication of the manuscript in Asia Europe Journal should the article be accepted by the Editor-in-chief upon completion of the process.

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