Higher Education and Practice Vol. 2 No. 11, 2025

Intelligent Learning Companions and Alienation: A Phenomenological Study of AI-Assisted Chinese Learning Experiences among Southeast Asian International Students

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Abstract: This study, based on phenomenological analysis, explores the subjective experiences of Southeast Asian international students from a university in Yunnan while using Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools to learn Chinese. Through in-depth interviews with five participants, the study reveals a core tension in their learning experiences: AI serves both as an "intelligent learning companion," providing learners with a low-anxiety, simulated teacher experience, and as a source of cultural alienation in some aspects. The research finds that, although AI tools provide significant assistance in language learning, their mechanical feedback often cannot replace the teacher's understanding of students' emotions and cultural backgrounds, leading to a sense of emotional and cultural void among learners. The results of the study suggest that future Chinese language education should emphasize a symbiotic relationship between humans and machines, fostering deep cultural and emotional interactions.

Keywords: AI-Assisted Learning; Phenomenological Analysis; Cultural Alienation; International Chinese Language Education

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Origin

Will learning become an effortless endeavor once AI can cater to students' diverse preferences? The answer is certainly not that simple. The application and research of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the global education sector are surging ahead with immense momentum. In the field of International Chinese Education, AI tools, owing to their powerful functionalities in speech recognition, essay grading, situational dialogue, and personalized recommendation, have rapidly evolved from a cutting-edge technology into an increasingly prevalent learning aid. This development, arguably, raises the bar for learning itself. The core tenet of International Chinese Smart Education is to ensure that all teaching and learning behaviors are fully supported by informatization and intelligentization.[1]

There exists a notable paradigmatic imbalance in research on the application of AI in Chinese language teaching: the vast majority of studies adhere to the positivist paradigm, focusing on investigating the effectiveness of AI tools through quantitative methods.[2] These studies typically concentrate on observable, measurable external indicators, such as whether using AI leads to significant improvements in students' test scores (e.g., HSK results), oral fluency, or vocabulary size compared to traditional methods; or they employ instruments like the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to survey learners' "Perceived Usefulness" and "Perceived Ease of Use" of AI. While these investigations undoubtedly hold value by providing preliminary evidence for the broad effectiveness of AI in education and facilitating the initial of the technology, it is also recognized that the application of tools like ChatGPT in education may pose four categories of risks: challenges to academic integrity and in assessment mechanisms; over-reliance, student addiction, and the potential weakening of the teacher's role; inaccuracies in information transmission and limitations in knowledge depth; and insufficient ethical awareness coupled with difficulties in managing ethical risks.

However, this "technology-efficacy" dominant research paradigm has inherent limitations. It treats the learning process as a "black box," overly focusing on the causal relationship between input (using AI) and output (academic performance), while systematically neglecting a core dimension: the internal, subjective, and

vivid lived experience of learners during their interaction with AI. AI does not operate in a vacuum; it is embedded within learners' daily lives, their emotional worlds, and their webs of meaning. Scores and scales alone cannot answer a series of crucial questions: How do learners feel when interacting with a non-human "intelligent agent"? How do they understand the role of AI in their learning journey? What unprecedented sense of empowerment does this new learning relationship bring, and what profound confusions might it trigger? The application of information technology in school education worldwide is manifested not only in the use of new classroom formats such as multimedia teaching, online classes, and interactive to implement personalized learning and teaching, but also in the extensive application of various AI technologies, including automated scoring, AI voice assistants, virtual laboratories, robotics, intelligent and teaching supported by big data analytics, as well as the generation of teaching materials and content.[3]

This study specifically focuses on Southeast Asian international students, a significant group of Chinese language learners. Their adoption and experience of AI tools are inevitably influenced by their unique cultural contexts and complex backgrounds. Through individual interviews, the study uncovers a range of nuanced and often contradictory emotions. The insights gained from these in-depth interviews provide valuable theoretical foundations and practical implications for future research.

1.2 Core Research Question

Phenomenological analysis of the interview data reveals a significant tension in international students' AI-assisted Chinese learning experiences. For example, one Burmese student highlighted the dual nature of AI's role. On one hand, AI serves as an efficiency tool, aiding in lesson preparation, content summarization, and lesson plan generation. It helps teachers save time by processing large amounts of literature quickly, showcasing its practical value.

On the other hand, AI also has limitations. The student pointed out that AI lacks personalized assistance and cannot fully understand the cultural and emotional aspects of language learning. Its mechanical feedback cannot replace the nuanced understanding that a teacher provides, as teaching involves more than just knowledge transmission—it requires attention to students' thought processes and comprehension.

This tension leads to a paradox: learners rely on AI for efficiency, yet resist depending on it completely. As the student noted, "AI should assist, not replace, teachers." This study will explore how AI, as a "learning companion," integrates into students' daily lives and how learners form relationships with it. It will examine AI's dual role in emotion, cognition, and culture, moving beyond traditional assessments of AI effectiveness to explore the complex dynamics between AI and learners. This will provide insights into the future of human-machine collaboration in international Chinese education.

1.3 Thesis Structure

This paper follows the classic phenomenological research process: "returning to the lifeworld → phenomenological description → phenomenological interpretation." Each chapter builds on the previous one to answer the study's core questions. The introduction critiques the "technology-efficacy" approach in AI education research and calls for a shift toward exploring learners' subjective experiences. Next, the methodology section explains the purposeful sampling of participants and the design of semi-structured interviews to uncover their lived experiences. Finally, the paper concludes with theoretical analysis and academic insights.

2. Phenomenological Perspective

Chinese intellectual resources, when articulated through the phenomenological method "as they are," open up new interpretive spaces [4]. The powerful impetus generated by generative artificial intelligence is compelling a reshaping of higher education forms [5]. Specifically, the phenomenological perspective: How is AI "intended" by learners as a learning companion? How is its "intelligence" endowed with meaning within experience? Husserl's concept of "Intentionality" reveals that consciousness is always consciousness "of something" [6]. Each question posed to AI, each request for correction by an international student, constitutes a unique intentional act: they are not merely acquiring linguistic knowledge but are establishing a relationship with an other that is presupposed as an "intelligent agent." Learners unilaterally project expectations of human dialogue (such as understanding, empathy, cultural sensitivity) onto AI, while AI can only respond with

algorithmically generated symbols. This fundamental asymmetry is precisely the key to understanding the dialectical tension between "empowerment" and "alienation" in their experience.

Therefore, "deep learning" from a phenomenological perspective refers not merely to the complexity of knowledge acquisition, but more fundamentally to the depth at which learners achieve "meaning-making" within technologically mediated environments [7]. This necessitates the researcher's attention to: How do learners negotiate between the allure of AI's efficiency and the sense of alienation stemming from a "cultural vacuum"? How do they reconstruct their agency in learning through reflective practices, such as the critical use of AI-generated content? The phenomenological method, through thick description, reveals these implicit, dynamic processes of meaning reconstruction, providing a philosophical foundation for understanding how AI can genuinely progress towards fostering "deep" learning that enhances cultural understanding and identity integration [8].

3. Description of Participants' Experiences

This study used purposive sampling to select participants who could provide rich and insightful information relevant to the research questions. The study involved five Southeast Asian international students, all of whom were enrolled at a university in Yunnan, China, and using AI tools to assist in their Chinese language learning. The participants hailed from Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Malaysia, with Chinese proficiency levels ranging from HSK 6 to 7 (intermediate to advanced). Each participant had at least six months of regular experience using various AI tools, such as ChatGPT, Wenxin Yiyan, Deepseek, Kimi, and Doubao, and they were able to clearly express their thoughts, emotions, and reflections on their experiences with these tools.

The researcher carefully and repeatedly reviewed each interview transcript, immersing themselves in the participants' narratives. During this process, three types of analytical notes were made on the margins of the text: descriptive notes (detailing specific events and content), linguistic notes (focusing on unique word choices, metaphors, repetitions, pauses, and other language features), and conceptual notes (initial interpretive reflections on the deeper meanings within the narratives).

A variety of "initial themes" were extracted in the early stages, each capturing distinct aspects of the participants' experiences. These themes aimed to remain as close as possible to the participants' original language and expressions.

The initial themes were then systematically compared, contrasted, categorized, and integrated to identify their logical connections, semantic relations, and hierarchical structures. Through this process, the themes were distilled and refined into more generalized, abstract, and explanatory concepts that better captured the essence of the participants' experiences.

3.1 Data Collection

Data for this study were primarily collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, which served as the main research method. The interview guide focused on key areas: (1) participants' background, typical scenarios, and behaviors when using AI tools to learn Chinese; (2) their emotional experiences, such as anxiety, pleasure, frustration, and security, as well as cognitive responses during interactions with AI; (3) their perceptions and metaphors of AI's role in their learning process; (4) how AI impacted their understanding of and feelings toward the Chinese language, culture, and society; and (5) how AI-assisted learning differed from traditional methods, such as classroom teaching, teacher-student interactions, and peer communication. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes in a quiet, comfortable setting, free from distractions.

After analyzing the individual interviews, the key themes were cross-compared and synthesized. Common patterns and structures across participants' experiences were identified, while also acknowledging individual differences and unique contexts. Ultimately, several central themes emerged that reflect the shared experiences of the entire participant group.

3.2 Empowering Experience

At the outset, some participants expressed strong reliance on and positive perceptions of the AI assistant. For many, AI offered a more personalized learning experience, which was marked by reduced anxiety and increased independence. It was often described as a patient, tireless learning partner. Unlike the fear of making mistakes when speaking with real teachers or classmates, AI was perceived as a

"safe" and "no-pressure" conversational companion. One participant, Guo from Thailand, said, "Using AI to search for information is so convenient. I even encourage my students to use AI for homework correction—it's much faster than asking me."

Participants frequently used AI for simulated conversations—such as ordering food or asking for directions—as well as for pronunciation correction and grammar queries. This non-judgmental environment provided vital emotional support, helping them gain confidence in their practice. It served as a "safe harbor" before engaging in real Chinese communication or as a versatile, on-demand tutor. The 24/7 availability and immediate feedback from AI gave learners a sense of control and greatly enhanced their learning efficiency. For example, Nguyen, a Vietnamese student, shared, "Whenever I encounter a new word, even while watching Douyin videos, I can take a screenshot and ask AI what it means and how to use it." Participants relied heavily on AI for quick translations, homework assistance (like revising essays or checking grammar), and generating personalized content, such as "Please create 5 dialogues about 'renting an apartment.'" They appreciated how AI could adjust the difficulty of vocabulary to match their proficiency and repeat concepts as needed, granting them unprecedented autonomy in their learning process.

3.3 Alienating Experience

As their learning progressed, most participants began to feel discomfort and a sense of cultural alienation when interacting with AI. While the AI-generated responses were often grammatically correct, they frequently lacked the depth and cultural richness found in human communication. Song, a student from Thailand, explained, "I don't often use AI to explain vocabulary. I prefer search engines like Baidu, where I can see how words are used in different contexts and remember where they apply." Similarly, Fang, a Burmese student, noted, "Using AI is like using a tool; I don't rely on it to solve all my questions."

When attempting to explore the origins of idioms, the nuanced usage of buzzwords, or sociocultural phenomena, AI often provided fragmented, informational explanations rather than a deeper, experiential understanding. This limited learners' cultural knowledge to a superficial "knowing about" level, preventing them from achieving a more profound, "embodied" understanding.

The constant availability of AI also led to what participants described as an "emotional vacuum." [9] Its mechanical feedback lacked the warmth and wisdom that a human teacher could provide. Nguyen, a Burmese student, shared, "AI doesn't help my students improve their learning wisdom. In the traditional way, we'd read a new passage filled with life-related questions, and if there were new words, we'd look them up in the dictionary. If they weren't there, we'd read the passage and complete exercises. If they didn't understand, I'd explain how to make sentences and use the words. My teacher used to make sentences with me, practice new vocabulary, and even tell us stories like Romance of the Three Kingdoms to teach us tones."

While learners trusted AI's efficiency and the answers it provided, they found it difficult to form emotional or cultural trust in the AI. One Vietnamese student summed it up: "I use AI to do my homework, but I don't trust it to understand real China. To feel the culture, you have to be friends with a living, breathing Chinese person."

AI can be useful for tasks like grading assignments, analyzing sentence structure, vocabulary, and grammar, which is helpful for teachers burdened with large volumes of work. While AI can enhance learning efficiency, it still requires significant effort from the learners, and the overload of information it provides can complicate the learning process, creating additional challenges. Participants expressed that their experiences with AI were far more complex than simply "useful" or "not useful." They appreciated its efficiency and the sense of security it provided, but they also felt the mechanical nature and emotional distance of AI, viewing it as a "culturally alien other." This dialectical tension formed the core of their AI-assisted Chinese learning experience.

4. Theoretical Explanation and Implications

This study, through an in-depth exploration of the interaction experiences between Southeast Asian international students and AI Chinese assistants, reveals a dialectical tension characterized by both dependence and alienation. This chapter aims to provide a phenomenological theoretical interpretation of these findings, clarify the theoretical

contributions and practical value of this research, and reflect on its limitations to suggest directions for future research.

4.1 Phenomenological Explanation

Phenomenology encourages us to set aside our preconceived notions about technology—such as viewing it merely as a "tool" or a "substitute"—and return to the lived experiences of learners engaging with AI. This study reveals that AI exists in the learner's lifeworld as a unique "Quasi-Other," a concept that transcends traditional interpretations of technology as merely a tool [10]. Learners project emotions and expectations onto AI, yet they receive only algorithm-driven responses, which significantly shapes their overall experience.

From Tool to Interactive Entity.In classical philosophy of technology, tools are often seen as extensions of human will, serving merely as instruments. However, the experiences of learners in this study suggest that AI, particularly generative AI with conversational capabilities, disrupts this dualistic subject-object relationship. The interactions between learners and AI go beyond simple exchanges; learners engage with AI by asking questions, expressing thoughts, and even venting frustrations, while AI responds in a manner that mimics a subject. This interaction suggests the development of a form of interactive subjectivity, where AI is regarded not just as a tool but as a conversational partner. This dynamic is why AI is often described as an "intelligent learning companion," creating a "safe harbor" effect for learners—it is more than a tool; it is an interactive entity.

The Paradox of the "Quasi-Other". However, this interactive subjectivity remains incomplete and flawed. The "Otherness" of AI is superficial. Lacking what Husserl termed "empathy," AI operates without its own lifeworld, and its responses are driven by algorithms rather than authentic understanding. As a result, AI becomes what we call a "culturally alien Other." This paradoxical existence—where AI appears subject-like yet does not truly embody subjectivity—illustrates the core dialectical tension in this study. Learners seek a culturally rich and emotionally engaging exchange with an "Other," but they encounter only a "Quasi-Other" that can mimic the form of empathy, not its essence. This tension gives rise to the paradox of trust: learners rely on AI for its functionality, yet experience a sense of alienation due to its lack of emotional and cultural depth.

4.2 Theoretical Dialogue and Contributions

Engaging with Sociocultural Theory. Vygotsky's theory of mediation suggests that tools play a crucial role in shaping human cognition. This study builds on this by proposing that AI acts as a powerful tool for mediating language learning. However, it also acknowledges that this mediation is inherently limited and biased. While AI can efficiently facilitate learning of language rules, such as grammar and vocabulary, it struggles to address the deeper aspects of language—such as cultural meanings, emotional nuances, and social contexts. This highlights the complexities and constraints of using technology to mediate language learning, reminding us that not all forms of mediation can be assumed to be equally effective.

Reconsidering the Role of AI. It is important to emphasize that AI is an excellent tool for practice, but it should not be viewed as a cultural mentor. AI can be a valuable addition to language courses, enhancing skills and offering personalized support. However, it cannot replace human interactions, which are essential for cultural and emotional understanding. Real-world communication with language partners, teachers, and collaborators fills the gaps that AI cannot address. A more effective model would integrate AI for practice and human interaction for cultural learning—creating a balanced approach of "AI-driven practice + human-guided application."

Fostering Critical AI Literacy. Educators should help students develop the skills to collaborate effectively with AI, allowing them to benefit from its efficiency while being mindful of its limitations. Students need to understand when it is appropriate to move beyond AI and seek human interpretation, particularly in areas requiring cultural insight. This approach encourages a more thoughtful use of AI, ensuring that students gain both the technical advantages AI offers and the human context that is essential for deeper learning.

4.3 Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations, which also suggest potential directions for future research. First, the sample size and diversity were limited. The study focused on just five Southeast Asian

international students, which, while allowing for a detailed exploration of individual experiences, limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could broaden the sample size to include a more diverse group of learners from different countries, with varying levels of Chinese proficiency and cultural backgrounds, to better understand the generalizability of these experiences.

Second, this study relied primarily on interview-based "self-report" data, which may introduce biases or limitations in the depth of the data collected. Future research could incorporate other qualitative methods, such as ethnographic observation, to gain insights into how students actually use AI in their daily learning. Diary studies could also be employed to track emotional and cognitive changes over a longer period of AI use, providing a more nuanced understanding of the evolving learner experience. Experimental methods could compare the effects of different AI designs on learners' cultural understanding and engagement.

Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable in examining how the dialectical tension between learners and AI evolves as AI tools improve, particularly with advancements like multimodal interaction and more emotionally responsive AI systems. Future studies could also explore the impact of AI as a "Quasi-Other" on learners' cultural identity development over time. Additionally, research could investigate whether this tension manifests differently in the context of non-Chinese language learning (such as English or Japanese) or in other academic fields, offering a broader perspective on AI's role in education across disciplines [11].

5. Conclusion

This study provides a thorough phenomenological analysis of the AI-assisted Chinese language learning experiences of Southeast Asian international students. It reveals that the essence of their experiences is characterized by a stable yet complex dialectical tension: while AI, as an "intelligent learning companion," offers emotional support and enhances cognitive efficiency, it simultaneously triggers a sense of cultural alienation. As a "culturally alien Other," AI's inherent emotional detachment and superficial cultural engagement create a paradox of trust, making learners feel both empowered and distanced. By employing a phenomenological perspective and the theoretical framework of the "Quasi-Other," this study moves beyond the narrow, utilitarian view of AI as a mere tool. It uncovers the nuanced emotional and cultural psychological mechanisms underlying human-AI interactions, which simultaneously involve dependence and alienation, utility and wariness.

These findings have important implications for the future of international Chinese education. While the integration of AI into education is increasingly seen as an inevitable step forward, the focus should not be on replacing traditional human-centered teaching with technology or on simply layering digital tools over existing educational frameworks. Instead, the future development of Chinese language education should aim to create a new, dynamic educational ecosystem in which human-AI collaboration and synergy flourish. In this ecosystem, the unique strengths of both AI and human teachers can complement each other in a balanced way. AI excels at handling repetitive, standardized, and data-intensive cognitive tasks, such as language practice, assessment, and content delivery. However, human teachers remain irreplaceable in nurturing the emotional and cultural dimensions of learning, fostering intrinsic motivation, and providing deep cultural insights that AI cannot replicate. Teachers also play a critical role in guiding value judgments, promoting emotional connections, and encouraging critical and creative thinking—skills that are essential for the holistic development of learners.

Ultimately, this study suggests that technology, when thoughtfully integrated, has the potential to enrich the learning experience, but it must be designed and implemented in a way that supports the development of the "whole person." Rather than simply improving language proficiency, AI can be a tool to help learners achieve broader growth in areas such as cultural understanding, cross-cultural competence, and the development of personal subjectivity in an increasingly digital world. Some scholars believe that research on technological empowerment has moved from tool description to the stages of effectiveness evaluation and ethical reflection, but research on solutions to deeper challenges, such as human-machine collaboration models and the digital divide, is still in its early stages.

In this context, AI should not be viewed as a

replacement for human interaction but as a complement that enhances the teaching and learning experience, facilitating a deeper, more meaningful engagement with the Chinese language and culture. Only by embracing this balanced approach can technology truly serve the development of well-rounded individuals in the digital age, empowering students to navigate and thrive in an interconnected, multicultural world.

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