

An Investigation into the Language Life of Overseas Chinese in Northern Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to investigate the current linguistic practices and the underlying causes influencing language use among overseas Chinese communities in northern Thailand, with the goal of enhancing their cultural identification with the Chinese nation. **Method:** Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates fieldwork, structured questionnaires, and in-depth interviews to conduct both quantitative and qualitative analyses of linguistic behavior and identity perception. **Results:** The findings reveal that ecological and demographic factors have transformed the once monolingual Chinese-character-based environment into a multilingual landscape that incorporates Thai, local minority languages, English, and Burmese. Despite this linguistic diversification, the relatively recent migration history and geographic isolation of these communities in mountainous regions have contributed to the preservation of a strong foundation in Chinese language and cultural traditions, distinguishing them from other overseas Chinese groups in Thailand. **Novelty:** This study introduces a multi-level, multi-domain, and multi-channel framework for promoting Chinese language and culture, offering a novel strategy for reinforcing ethnic and cultural identity. The research provides empirical insights that contribute to the discourse on language identity and cultural transmission in diasporic settings, serving as a valuable reference for future academic and policy-oriented studies.

INTRODUCTION

Northern Thailand occupies a strategic geographical position and is home to a substantial population of Chinese immigrants who maintain strong ties to China. These immigrants are primarily descendants of the 93rd Division of the former Kuomintang, who relocated to northern Thailand following their defeat in 1949 [4]. They subsequently surrendered, acquired Thai citizenship, and established over 90 Chinese villages across the region.

In today's globalized world, migration often results in profound changes in both language practices and cultural identity, potentially leading to crises of identity for individuals. The manner in which these crises are addressed significantly influences identity formation and relationships with both home and host countries. However, there remains a notable gap in research concerning this aspect of language life.

Accordingly, this study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate and interpret the language life of overseas Chinese in northern Thailand, aiming to assist them in navigating linguistic and cultural challenges while strengthening their sense of connection with both their ancestral homeland and China.

Background of the Research

Against the backdrop of intensified cultural exchange and civilizational dialogue between China and the international community, overseas Chinese have emerged as natural cultural intermediaries and communicators. They play a vital role in bridging cognitive differences between their ancestral homeland and host countries and in fostering cross-cultural understanding. Leveraging their bilingual proficiency and bicultural background, overseas Chinese communities have become indispensable actors in promoting the global dissemination of Chinese culture and telling China's story to the world.

Located at the core of the Indochina Peninsula, Northern Thailand (hereafter referred to as "Northern Thailand") borders Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar, serving as a crucial geographical link between China and Southeast Asia. Over half a century ago, a large number of immigrants from Yunnan Province, China, settled in this region, forming distinctive overseas Chinese communities characterized by strong cultural and kinship ties to their homeland, often referred to as the "Yunnanese in Northern Thailand." Through their long-term practice of cross-cultural living, these communities have developed a multilingual and culturally hybrid linguistic ecology.

However, academic attention to the linguistic life of the overseas Chinese communities in Northern Thailand remains relatively limited. In particular, there is a noticeable lack of empirical research that systematically explores their language transmission practices, influencing factors, and cultural implications from the integrated perspectives of language ecology, sociolinguistics, and cultural identity studies. In response to this gap, this study focuses on the Chinese communities in Northern Thailand, aiming to reveal the current status and influencing factors of their language use and Chinese language transmission. Furthermore, it proposes strategies to promote the sustained inheritance of the Chinese language and culture, thereby contributing theoretical and practical insights for advancing Chinese cultural outreach and strengthening grassroots-level friendship between China and Northern Thailand.

Literature Review

1. Research on Overseas Language Life

The concept of language life has existed since ancient times, although the term itself was formally introduced at the end of the 20th century. In Western academia, the term is not widely used; instead, research concerning language life typically adopts various terminologies to describe linguistic conditions and usage. Scholars such as Nishio Minoru [22] have provided clear definitions, with Nishio being the first to apply the concept in the context of Mandarin and Chinese education as early as 1929 [22]. Kindaichi [11] introduced the concept of "language life" in linguistic research, which was later elaborated upon by Tokieda Motoki and Minami Fujio.

This concept was initially proposed by the Japanese academic community to facilitate research on national language issues and language policy decision-making [35]. defined language life as encompassing various forms of language behavior manifested in human daily life, emphasizing the role of language behavior and its

connection to everyday activities. Research on language life began formally in Japan in 1948 and has since garnered sustained scholarly attention. In 1951, a report on language use in Fukushima County documented the rising popularity of the common language. In 1971, a study on the use of honorifics collected data using the "24-hour survey method" within housewives' daily conversations. The *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* has also featured surveys related to mass media, personal communication, language venues, idiomatic expressions, and the historical development of language life [36].

In contrast, Western scholars tend to adopt the term "language use" rather than "language life" in sociolinguistic studies – an approach reflected in the works of many prominent researchers [6]–[9], [12]–[14], [25], [27], [28]. Large-scale surveys on linguistic life have been conducted within the social sciences, with notable examples including *Language Surveys in Developing Countries* and *Language in Ethiopia* by Ferguson and Cooper [37].

2. Research on Chinese Language Life

Li [16] and Chen [2] defined "language life" as the use of language and writing across various social and personal activities. Chen [2] emphasized that the language life of Chinese society is influenced by social factors such as politics, economy, and culture, leading to variations across different periods, countries, and regions. Li [16] was the first scholar in China to define "language life" as a professional term, referring to social and personal activities involving language use. In 1997, Li [15] further pointed out that all activities related to the learning, use, and study of language and script, as well as the application of research findings, fall within the domain of language life.

Li [18] also proposed that language life encompasses various social and personal activities involving the application of language and script. According to Li [17], language life consists of application, learning, and research activities, and covers language, linguistic knowledge, and language technology. Dai [5] and Zhou [34] similarly discussed language life, emphasizing that it encompasses language use, function, ontology, relationships, and evolution across different contexts such as countries, regions, nations, and institutional units. Its scope includes historical background, geographic languages, social languages, legal languages, science, technology, commerce, and cultural aspects of specific regions.

The sociolinguistic situation thus reflects how languages are used and perceived within a community. Key studies on language use in Southeast Asia include research on the Chinese language in the region [20], multilingualism in Singapore [23], language attitudes among Chinese Singaporeans [3], and linguistic fusion among Chinese communities in Malaysia [10].

In summary, language life comprises social activities involving language usage across countries, regions, nations, and groups. To better understand the overseas Chinese in northern Thailand, it is crucial to analyze their language use, language attitudes, and learning patterns.

3. A Study on the Language Life of Overseas Chinese in Northern Thailand

Research on overseas Chinese in northern Thailand has primarily been conducted within the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, political science, and ethnology. However, there is a notable deficiency of studies in the field of linguistics, with most existing research concentrating on language teaching and dialect usage. For example, previous studies have explored topics such as Chinese education [29], [32], [30], [31], language attitudes [33], and linguistic variation among Chinese speakers [26].

In one study, Qi and colleagues [24] conducted a survey and analysis of grammatical variation in the Yunnan dialect among Chinese communities in northern Thailand. It is evident that existing literature on language studies concerning overseas Chinese in northern Thailand primarily focuses on language instruction and dialect use among Yunnanese Chinese. There remains a significant gap in research addressing the linguistic life of overseas Chinese in this region, with a particular lack of studies employing mixed-methods approaches that combine both quantitative and qualitative analyses [19].

RESEARCH METHOD

1. Participants

This study randomly selected 472 individuals from 90 Chinese villages in Northern Thailand, comprising 190 men and 282 women. The mean age of the participants was 24.73 years. Their primary occupations were reported in the fields of "scientific research and education" and "agriculture, forestry, fishery, and animal husbandry." The participants' educational attainment was predominantly low, with the majority having completed education below the middle school level. Illiteracy was particularly prevalent among respondents from the first and second generations.

There was a notable deficiency in higher education within the population, and the majority of participants adhered to Buddhism, while smaller proportions followed Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and other faiths. Subsequently, the author conducted semi-structured interviews with 50 villagers.

2. Instruments and Data Analysis

Based on the data collected from the Household Questionnaire II regarding the utilization of Chinese languages and characters, this study developed a survey titled "Questionnaire on the Language Practices of overseas Chinese in Northern Thailand" (in both Chinese and Thai languages). The survey consists of two sections. Initially, participants were required to provide personal information such as gender, age, Chinese generational background, occupation, educational level, and religious beliefs, either by filling in blanks or selecting from multiple-choice options.

Subsequently, the survey included sections on language life, language use (across family, social, and informational contexts), language attitudes (towards Mandarin, the Yunnan dialect, standard Thai, and Thai dialects), and motivations for language learning (including factors such as identity, social expectations, educational background, understanding of Chinese culture, professional requirements, and personal aspirations).

All items were presented in multiple-choice formats and Likert five-point scale questions. The Likert five-point scale utilized in this survey demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.781 and a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of 0.60.

Out of 500 questionnaires distributed, 487 were successfully recovered, with 380 completed in Chinese and 92 in Thai. The questionnaire recovery rate was 97%, with 15 questionnaires deemed invalid, resulting in 472 valid responses and an effective rate of 94.4%. The high recovery and effectiveness rates are attributed to the clear and detailed instructions provided in the questionnaire.

The survey data were initially compiled using Epidata 17.0, analyzed through SPSS 20.0, and subjected to quantitative analysis utilizing both descriptive and inferential statistical methods.

A subset of 50 villagers was randomly selected from the 472 subjects for semi-structured interviews, which were both recorded and videotaped. Qualitative analysis of the interviews was conducted using Nvivo 12.0. Given Nvivo 12.0's ability to directly analyze audio and video data, the study adopted this software for encoding while maintaining the original content without modification. The interviews primarily focused on the following inquiries: providing a brief overview of personal background, life experiences, and community settings (as illustrated in Table 1)

Table 1. Sample of questionnaire

Items	Questions
1	How many languages are you proficient in?
2	Which language or dialect do you believe you excel the most?
3	Which specific languages are they?
4	Where did you acquire proficiency in these languages?
5	What language do you prefer when residing or working in Thailand?
6	What factors influence this preference?
7	What language or dialect do you frequently utilize to communicate with your family members?
8	What motivates this choice?
9	Which language or dialect do you commonly employ for interpersonal communication?
10	What languages or terms are commonly utilized when seeking information
11	Which language is deemed most advantageous for daily life in Thailand?
12	How do you perceive the differences between Chinese and Thai languages?

Ultimately, a consistent parallel mixed-methods research approach was employed to integrate quantitative and qualitative data, with specific procedures outlined as follows. Initially, a comprehensive descriptive analysis of the participants' language utilization patterns was conducted, followed by the examination of the correlation between the "language use" variable and demographic factors. A cross-tabulation was utilized to assess the frequency of nominal variable usage, and a chi-square test was subsequently employed to determine the correlation coefficients and strength of association between language use and demographic characteristics, including gender, age, ethnic Chinese generation, occupation, and educational attainment.

This methodology was designed to elucidate the language habits and determinants of the respondents. Expert review and questionnaire pretest data analysis were conducted to validate the scientific rigor and credibility of the questionnaire.

Additionally, grounded theory was applied to analyze field survey data—including audio and video recordings, images, and textual materials—by simplifying complexity, discerning truth from falsehood, encoding information, and establishing conceptual connections.

The technique of triangulation was further employed to assess the scientific validity and credibility of the qualitative research. Moreover, the results of quantitative and qualitative analyses were integrated to elucidate correlations and distinctions, interpreted within the frameworks of ecological linguistics, postmodernism, and other relevant theoretical paradigms, ultimately culminating in a comprehensive conclusion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

1. The Situation of Spoken and Written Language Usage in Northern Thailand

1.1 Current Situation of the Spoken Language Usage

Currently, Chinese is the predominant language spoken among overseas Chinese residing in northern Thailand, particularly among the younger demographic, followed by Thai, while local minority languages and Burmese are the least utilized. In the domain of family communication, the predominant language employed by participants is the "Yunnan dialect." Although participants may occasionally incorporate limited use of standard Thai and Thai dialects when conversing with female family members such as grandmothers or mothers, the use of Thai remains infrequent in communications with grandparents. Data analysis indicates that the average frequency of Yunnan dialect usage among participants ($n = 472$; maximum = 1, minimum = 0) across interactions with various family members—including grandparents, grandmothers, grandfathers, mothers, fathers, and siblings—is consistently high, with mean values of 0.79, 0.78, 0.78, 0.77, and 0.71, respectively. The mean frequencies for these dialects exceed those for Mandarin Chinese (Putonghua), standard Thai, and Thai dialects. Furthermore, individuals seldom employ standard Thai or Thai dialects when communicating with their grandparents, with notably low mean values of 0.06 and 0.07, respectively. Field observations revealed that third-generation Chinese individuals habitually utilized the Yunnan dialect when

interacting with their first-generation grandparents. Additionally, second-generation Chinese individuals exclusively employed the Yunnan dialect when discussing the sale of cakes, tea, and other local products with their spouses in their family-owned bakeries. Moreover, when urging their children to promptly return home to complete their homework, second-generation individuals continued to utilize the Yunnan dialect.

In the realm of social interactions, participants exhibit a heightened degree of linguistic complexity. Data analysis shows that within governmental institutions and healthcare facilities, the mean usage of standard Thai stands at 0.83 and 0.82, respectively, approaching the theoretical maximum of 1. This trend underscores the widespread compliance with Thai governmental regulations, as evidenced by the predominant use of standard Thai in governmental offices, hospitals, state-run educational institutions, and other formal settings. Nevertheless, in informal public settings such as food markets, roadside restaurants, and community centers, overseas Chinese individuals—descendants of those who migrated from Yunnan, China to northern Thailand approximately half a century ago—continue to employ the Yunnan dialect when interacting with neighbors, relatives, and friends. This preference for the Yunnan dialect persists unless standard Thai is required for communication in official public venues. Mandarin Chinese is primarily reserved for interactions with mainland Chinese tourists or within Chinese educational institutions. Field observations further indicated that participants, when engaging in early morning market transactions for vegetables and breakfast, predominantly utilized the Yunnan dialect or select minority languages, while switching to standard Thai when interacting with Thai governmental checkpoints.

Within the context of information consumption, participants predominantly utilized standard Thai and Thai dialects when accessing media such as radio broadcasts, movies, television programs, newspapers, and magazines. The average usage values for these mediums were 0.69, 0.68, 0.67, and 0.65, respectively, approaching the maximum theoretical value of 1. The language practices of participants are also significantly shaped by the local language ecology. Given northern Thailand's geographic proximity to Yunnan, China, the "Yunnanese" diaspora frequently receives Chinese-language television programming from mainland China. Survey data show that participants actively engage with Chinese characters through exposure to Chinese television dramas and satellite broadcasts, reflected in an average influence score of 0.68, close to the maximum of 1. This indicates that standard Thai, Thai script, Mandarin Chinese, and Chinese characters are the primary languages utilized by the Yunnanese population in northern Thailand for information acquisition.

In conclusion, individuals' language choices are shaped by both the surrounding linguistic environment and their ethnic identity. Given the dominance of Thai culture, individuals are often compelled to use standard Thai in formal public settings, in accordance with national language policies. However, in informal contexts such as homes, markets, and eateries, individuals may choose to use Chinese—particularly the Yunnan dialect—driven by cultural customs and emotional connections within the

Chinese ethnic community. Within this unique, unofficial, and informal language ecology, many individuals demonstrate proficiency not only in Thai and Chinese but also in local minority languages such as Lisu and Miao.

Additionally, language use is influenced by demographic characteristics. Notably, significant gender differences were observed only in communication with grandparents within the family domain ($\chi^2 = 20.238$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$). In the domains of family communication, social interaction, and information access, individuals exhibit marked variations in language use based on age and Chinese generational status. Some differences were also noted in relation to occupation, educational attainment, and religious affiliation.

In conclusion, the language choices of individuals are influenced by both the linguistic environment and their ethnic identity. Given the dominance of Thai culture, individuals are compelled to use standard Thai in formal public settings as mandated by language policies. However, in informal settings like homes, markets, and eateries, individuals may opt to use the Chinese language, particularly the Yunnan dialect, based on cultural practices and emotional connections within the Chinese ethnic community. In the unique unofficial and informal language ecology, subjects demonstrate proficiency in not only Thai and Chinese, but also in local minority languages such as Lisu and Miao. Additionally, the subjects' language use is influenced by demographic characteristics, with significant gender differences observed only in communication with grandparents within the family domain ($\chi^2=20.238$, $df=3$, $p=0.000*<0.001$). In the domains of family, social interactions, and information dissemination, individuals exhibit notable variations in language usage based on age and Chinese generational differences, with some distinctions also observed in relation to occupation, educational attainment, and religious affiliation.

1.2 Current Situation of the Written Language Usage

The utilization of written characters in northern Thailand significantly diverges from the expectations of the Thai government. In informal public settings, Chinese characters predominate among the local populace, followed by Thai characters and English characters. The Chinese characters predominantly used are traditional Chinese characters brought to Thailand from the Chinese Mainland approximately fifty years ago during earlier waves of migration. In recent years, with the rapid socio-economic development of the Chinese Mainland and the global dissemination of Chinese culture, the adoption of simplified Chinese characters has become increasingly prevalent in Chinese villages located in northern Thailand, particularly to enhance communication and cultural ties with their ancestral homeland. Furthermore, within these Chinese villages, ethnic minority groups such as the Lisu, Miao, and Wa, who have migrated from Yunnan since the 13th century, continue to reside alongside the overseas Chinese community. In the context of a diverse linguistic landscape, minority languages are primarily preserved within their respective ethnic communities. However, overseas Chinese individuals with higher socio-economic status and more advanced cultural capital tend to have limited engagement with local minority languages, likely due to the

underdeveloped economic and cultural conditions of these minority regions. Consequently, language practices within these villages exhibit a complex interplay between heritage preservation and socio-economic stratification.

In recent years, despite a continued preference for Chinese characters among segments of the Chinese ethnic group—driven by Chinese cultural affinity and national identity—the prevalence of Thai characters in public spaces within Chinese villages remains significant. This phenomenon can be largely attributed to the Thai government's active promotion of Thai culture and language. Specifically, Thai characters are most commonly observed in public signage, such as village arches, official signboards, and public notices, followed by English characters and, lastly, Chinese characters. Notably, English is often afforded higher symbolic status than Chinese characters as a foreign language in Thailand, reflecting the Thai government's orientation toward Westernization in linguistic policy. This preferential status places Chinese characters in a vulnerable position, even within communities with significant overseas Chinese populations. Nevertheless, due to government regulations and practical needs, Chinese characters are still actively used in unofficial and private settings. In public and formal domains, however, individuals are obliged to employ Thai characters in compliance with official regulations. At present, as the younger generation of ethnic Chinese increasingly enrolls in Thai governmental primary and secondary schools, they are exposed to and become proficient in Thai and English in addition to Chinese characters. This evolving linguistic education reflects the complex realities of linguistic hybridization and cultural negotiation among the overseas Chinese community in northern Thailand.

2. Language Attitude of the overseas Chinese in northern Thailand

Among the overseas Chinese community in northern Thailand, Mandarin Chinese and the Yunnan dialect are the predominant languages used, followed closely by standard Thai. In contrast, the Thai dialect is the least commonly recognized and utilized. Chinese villages in this region have consistently upheld and transmitted cultural principles that prioritize the preservation of Chinese heritage, with a strong emphasis on education—particularly Chinese language education—and the promotion of virtuous behavior. As a result, villagers have extensively utilized Chinese characters in their daily lives, established Chinese language schools with great enthusiasm to preserve and promote Chinese culture, and cultivated a collective commitment among all generations to prioritize the inheritance of the Chinese language and cultural traditions in various social and educational endeavors. These practices demonstrate a profound appreciation and reverence for the linguistic and cultural heritage of their ancestral homeland.

Table 2. Linguistic heritage in homeland

Language types	Emotional Dimension		Status Dimension	Usage Dimension	
	sounds good or not	Sounds kind or not	have identity or not	Easy to use or not	Convenient or not
Chinese	M=3.80	M=3.88	M=3.83	M=4.40	M= 3.86
Mandarin	SD=0.839	SD=0.838	SD=0.841	SD=0.792	SD=1.021
Standard	M=3.75	M=3.81	M=3.80	M=4.27	M= 4.14
Thai	SD=0.871	SD=0.855	SD=0.832	SD=0.823	SD=0.896
Chinese	M=3.80	M=4.04	M=3.29	3.83	M=3.96
Dialect	SD=0.872	SD=0.894	SD=0.962	SD=0.885	SD=0.992
(Yunnan					
Dialect)					
Thai	M=3.31	M=3.30	M=3.74	M=3.33	M= 3.20
Dialect	SD=1.061	SD=1.049	SD=0.866	SD=1.000	SD=0.855

The data presented in Table 2 indicate that participants perceive the Thai dialect as less pleasant compared to Mandarin Chinese, standard Thai, and the Yunnan dialect. This is evidenced by the lower mean score of 3.31 (SD = 1.061) for the Thai dialect, whereas Mandarin Chinese and the Yunnan dialect received higher mean scores in the emotional dimension assessment. From the perspective of emotional intimacy, participants perceive the Yunnan dialect as the most familiar among the four assessed languages, followed by Mandarin Chinese, standard Thai, and Thai dialects, respectively. This pattern suggests a strong emotional connection to Chinese languages (Mandarin and the Yunnan dialect) and a high regard for their status. Notably, the Yunnan dialect achieved the highest mean score of 4.04 (SD = 0.894) among all languages evaluated.

In terms of perceived language status, participants view Mandarin Chinese, standard Thai, and the Yunnan dialect as having higher status compared to the Thai dialect. The mean score for Mandarin Chinese (M = 3.83, SD = 0.841) was the highest, followed by standard Thai. Regarding language usage preference, participants favor Mandarin Chinese most strongly, followed by standard Thai, with Thai dialects being the least preferred. This preference is reflected in the mean scores, where Mandarin Chinese attained the highest mean of 4.40 (SD = 0.792) and the Thai dialect obtained the lowest mean of 3.33 (SD = 1.000).

Furthermore, participants expressed a practical preference for using standard Thai over Mandarin Chinese within the Thai context, primarily due to its convenience. Standard Thai was rated as the most convenient language for daily communication compared to Mandarin Chinese and the Yunnan dialect, while the Thai dialect was perceived as the least convenient. The mean convenience rating for standard Thai was 4.14 (SD = 0.896), whereas the Thai dialect received a considerably lower rating of 3.20 (SD = 0.855). Although these individuals, as descendants of recent immigrants from Yunnan who relocated to Thailand approximately fifty years ago, maintain a strong

emotional attachment to Mandarin Chinese and the Yunnan dialect, they have increasingly recognized the necessity of employing standard Thai for integration into the dominant linguistic and societal structures of Thailand. Additionally, the younger generation, born in Thailand, is required to attend government schools where standard Thai is the medium of instruction. As a result, standard Thai has come to be perceived not only as a tool for educational and professional advancement but also as a practical necessity for everyday life in Thailand.

Despite recognizing the greater convenience of standard Thai, participants predominantly used it only when communicating with the Thai population—the dominant ethnic group in Thailand. Within Chinese villages, however, they maintained a strong preference for their native Chinese languages, particularly the Yunnan dialect, in private settings. This behavior can be attributed to their adoption of Thai largely as a response to governmental policies and societal pressure, rather than genuine personal affinity for the language. Adapting to the prevailing language ecology proved to be a challenging process, as illustrated by sentiments such as: “In the Thai environment, we should speak Thai for life.” While participants acknowledged the importance of Thai for academic purposes, many simultaneously emphasized their identification with Chinese as their mother tongue.

Although Thai was regularly spoken in interactions with Thai individuals, a preference for Chinese remained a source of optimism and cultural grounding. Over the past fifty years, the Thai government’s consistent promotion of the Thai language has contributed to a shift in language attitudes among native-born and younger generations of overseas Chinese, evolving from a stance of obligatory acknowledgment to one of voluntary acceptance. It is possible that, in the future, recognition of the Thai language may even surpass that of Chinese within this community.

Despite feeling that standard Thai was more convenient, the subjects predominantly utilized it only when communicating with the Thai population, the dominant ethnic group in Thailand. In Chinese villages, they maintained their preference for their native Chinese language, particularly the Yunnan dialect, in private settings. This behavior can be attributed to the subjects' adoption of Thai as a result of government policies and societal pressures, rather than genuine personal affinity towards the language. Adapting to the language ecology proved to be a challenging endeavor, as individuals expressed sentiments such as, "In the Thai environment, we should speak Thai for life." While acknowledging the importance of Thai for academic pursuits, some also emphasized their preference for Chinese as their mother tongue. Despite speaking Thai in interactions with Thai individuals, a preference for Chinese was noted as a source of optimism. Over the past fifty years, the Thai government's emphasis on the Thai language has led to a shift in attitudes among native-born and younger generations, moving from a stance of obligatory acknowledgment to one of voluntary acceptance. It is possible that in the future, the recognition of the Thai language may surpass that of Chinese among these individuals.

3. Language Learning Status of the Overseas Chinese in Northern Thailand

Overseas Chinese residing in northern Thailand prioritize Chinese language acquisition over the learning of Thai and English. In terms of learning motivation, individuals frequently choose to study Chinese due to their strong identification with Chinese culture, resulting in a higher preference for Chinese language learning compared to Thai. As articulated by Participant 3, familial expectations play a significant role in shaping individuals' attitudes toward Chinese language proficiency, with parents in the community emphasizing the importance of mastering the language as a means of preserving their cultural heritage.

In the domains of learning motivation, social expectations, educational goals, and employment aspirations, the rate of selection for Chinese language courses among Chinese individuals is marginally higher than that for Thai. The primary motivations for Chinese individuals to pursue Chinese language learning include the desire to maintain their cultural heritage, secure employment opportunities requiring Chinese proficiency, and access educational opportunities in China. Furthermore, in the area of motivation related to understanding national conditions, Chinese individuals demonstrate a stronger preference for learning Chinese compared to Thai individuals, driven by a curiosity to explore Chinese culture and deepen their understanding of their heritage. Conversely, in the realms of life motivation and practical daily needs, Thai language learning is more prominent among participants. This trend can be attributed to the necessity of acquiring proficiency in the dominant language of Thai society in order to effectively integrate into the broader socio-cultural milieu. As exemplified by Participant 2, proficiency in Thai is a prerequisite for accessing educational opportunities in Thai government schools.

Discussion

In conclusion, participants exhibited a preference for learning Chinese in relation to identity formation, adherence to social norms, educational advancement, employment prospects, and the understanding of national contexts. However, for daily life motivations, they demonstrated a greater inclination toward learning Thai, reflecting both cultural loyalty to Chinese heritage and pragmatic adaptation to local conditions. Additionally, Thai language acquisition emerged as a secondary but necessary choice due to governmental regulations and the prevailing Thai linguistic environment. Ultimately, English language learning was regarded as a tertiary but valuable tool for broader communication needs. This pattern of language learning reflects not only participants' subjective emotional orientations but also objective requirements imposed by their living ecology.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: This study reveals that the ethnic Chinese communities in northern Thailand engage in a complex process of cultural and linguistic negotiation, marked by the hybridization of language practices that integrate Chinese, Thai, and local

minority languages. This hybridity reflects both a strong attachment to Chinese identity and a gradual adaptation to the sociolinguistic dynamics of Thai society. **Implication :** The findings underscore the significance of language as a vehicle for identity construction and cultural resilience in marginalized diaspora communities, suggesting that symbolic and functional use of language can empower minority groups to assert visibility and negotiate belonging in multicultural contexts. **Limitation :** However, the research is limited by its localized focus on northern Thailand, which may not capture the broader variations in language practices and identity formation among overseas Chinese in different Thai regions or global settings. **Future Research :** Subsequent studies should adopt a comparative approach across diverse diaspora communities and explore the role of digital media and transnational networks in shaping evolving language ideologies and cultural affiliations.

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ETHICS STATEMENT

All procedures involving the six participants in this study complied with the ethical standards of national research regulations in China. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Guangzhou University.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All datasets used in this study were collected through interviews and fieldwork observations. The data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Juanjuan Liu (J. Liu) was responsible for data collection, data processing, manuscript writing, and revisions.

Katematu Duangmanee (D. Katematu) contributed to manuscript editing and revisions, and managed all correspondence with the journal during the submission and peer-review processing.
