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The Commodification of Chinese in Thailand's Linguistic Market: A Case Study of How Language Education Promotes Social Sustainability

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Abstract: In recent decades, the commodification of the English language has aroused intensive research interest in the sociolinguistics on a global scale, but studies on the commodification of the Chinese language are relatively rare. Most studies take a critical approach in relation to its adverse impacts on minority rights and social justice. This study examined the language landscape in Chiangmai, Thailand, and the linguistic beliefs of local Thai Chinese language learners. Based on their feedback, this study investigated the commodification of Chinese language education in the community of Chinese language learners in Chiangmai. We found that from a less critical perspective, the commodification of a second language provides more accessible and affordable educational opportunities for learners, especially those from low-income families, and at the same time language proficiency can broaden learners' career choices and provide employees with additional value in industries, such as tourism, commerce, and services. This finding implies that language commodification, rather than typically being associated with linguistic imperialism and unbalanced socio-economic status, can be a contributing factor in promoting higher-education availability and social sustainability in certain circumstances. There may be some mediating factors between the commodification of language and changes in the sustainable balance of language, opening up space for future research to explore.

Keywords: language commodification; language instrumentalism; multilingualism; Chinese education in Thailand

1. Introduction

Recent sociolinguistic studies of globalization highlighted how multilingualism is transformed by material conditions of the new globalized economy. Particularly, research on commodification of language and identity has been most influential among these studies [1,2]. Namely, language in the new economy is increasingly seen as a marketable resource or skill, rather than an identity marker [3,4]. With the increased contact and mixing of different language varieties under globalization, the nationalist ideology of “one language – one culture – one nation” has been inevitably challenged [5] and multilingualism has emerged as a central concern for post-national sociolinguistics [6].

In this context, learning Chinese as a foreign language outside China has been booming across many countries in recent decades in terms of the number of learners and schools offering courses [7] (see also [8] for a discussion of how Korean language, or Korean–English bilingualism, has gained its popularity in some global linguistic markets in the new economy). Although Chinese language education outside China has been the subject of extensive attention and research, empirical studies

focusing on its commodification are scarce [9]. Currently, little research has investigated how learners and educators construct the meaning of language learning in certain contexts, while a great deal of work has been devoted to theorizing language acquisition and teaching strategies based on the context of Chinese language education.

Commodification is a process in which something enters freely or forcibly into a relationship of exchange with an instrument of payment [10]. The commodification of language means that language becomes an exchangeable commodity. Heller [11] summarized a number of recent studies and suggested the main approaches and domains where this has happened. On a global scale, language commodification can mainly be observed in English as a global language [12–14]. Major findings suggest that, as a resource for humanity, the commodification of language may be a threat to the linguistic ecology and may even cause social injustice. However, very few studies have given attention to the commodification of Chinese. Liu and Gao [15] implemented a corpus analysis of the Irish media to investigate Chinese language commodification in the Irish media discourse, but as an increasing number of language learners outside China attempt to acquire Chinese as a second language, it is of increasing importance to develop case studies in different contexts in order to analyze the extent, the domain, and impacts of Chinese language commodification.

This study was conducted in Thailand, which is a nation-state with its own unique language and ethnicity. The language practice in Thai society is monolingual; multilingual practice is maintained in some domains, but the standard Thai language is the primary language used by most nationals [16]. English has a long tradition and a superior status over other languages in the Thai government's policy on foreign language education. The Thai government has imposed several restrictions on Chinese language education since the 1950s, including limiting the number of hours of Chinese language instruction in public education and restricting the opening of private Chinese schools [17,18].

Despite these restrictions from the Thai government, however, Chinese language education has witnessed a recent surge in the number of learners and private schools. This may be associated with the rapid growth of Chinese tourism and its major impacts on Thailand's economy. According to a recent study [19], the service sector is an important industry for Thailand's economic and social development, and statistics in 2018 indicated that 56.91% of GDP was generated by the service sector, in which tourism accounts for a significant proportion. In just over a decade Thailand has become an important overseas tourist destination for Chinese tourists, creating a huge demand for dining, hotels, shopping, and services every year. In 2018 the number of visitors from China accounted for 27.5% of total visitors to Thailand.

This study examined how Chinese language learners in Thailand construct meanings around learning Chinese through a mixed method study, employing a linguistic landscape survey, questionnaires, virtual ethnography, and semi-structured interviews. We first investigated the local linguistic landscape to get a preliminary understanding of the Chinese language usage in the local Thai context. Then, through a questionnaire we investigated the self-reported meaning of the language among Chinese language learners. Finally, we explored the social impacts behind this construction of meaning through semi-structured interviews.

Social sustainability is defined as "Development and/or growth that is compatible with the harmonious evolution of civil society, fostering an environment conducive to the compatible cohabitation of culturally and socially diverse groups while at the same time encouraging social integration, with improvements in the quality of life for all segments of the population" [20]. We wish to analyze whether the commodification of second language education could be a contributing factor in social sustainability, since Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is increasingly recognized by the international community as a key factor in promoting sustainable development [21]. On 25 September, 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, which includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Education, as the fourth dedicated goal for sustainable development, is aiming to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote

lifelong learning opportunities for all” [22]. To achieve these goals, Education can and must contribute to a new vision of sustainable global development [23].

2. Literature Review

Most studies have examined the cognitive developmental advantages of language for children and the significance of language for the construction of individual identities. The commodification of language has paved the way to a new approach to understanding the role of language in the development of individuals and societies. In this field a common view is critical; Heller [10] summarized two major methods of language commodification: the legitimating of a language to establish authenticity, such as redistributing the locus of legitimacy of World English; or the production and reproduction of language as a commodity in a new economy, such as language teaching and call center industries. This analysis argues for a more critical point of view to understand the new globalized economy in which linguistic practices are carried out. However, this view is less based on micro evidence from individual experiences and more based on macro conceptual discussions of human rights [24,25], or Bourdieu’s theory of the exchange of symbolic and material resources [26], both of which are Western culturally and theoretically embedded concepts.

To build a more learner-based perspective and reconsider the impacts of language commodification individually, this research adopted self-reporting methods. Among various techniques, the Likert scale is a method to measure individual language ideological feedback [27,28]. However, since language learners’ direct articulation and reporting of the commodification of language may be abstract and difficult, especially for beginning learners, a more applicable approach could be implementing a system of multidimensional ideologies that includes statements that learners can understand. Though feedback and data, we could analyze whether the features of an individual’s linguistic ideology matched the theoretical assumption of the commodification of language. Fitzsimmons-Doolan [27] exemplified how a Likert scale could be implemented to measure the ideologies of language learners which could be developed into several statements that associate language with different social meaning including national identity, language globalization, or instrumentalism.

The linguistic landscape documentation method investigates social multilingualism by collecting and analyzing language on public signs [29]. Because of the circulation of language as a commodity in society, the linguistic landscape serves as an important representation for documenting the extent and domain of language commodification. The results of a linguistic landscape survey, the reporting of interviewees, and the theory of language commodification provide triangular validation in our study.

3. Research Design

In this study, we set out to answer the following questions.

- (1) To what extent and in which domains is the Chinese language commodified through the linguistic landscape in Chiangmai?
- (2) What is the language ideology of local Chinese language learners in Chiangmai?
- (3) In what ways might the commodification of the Chinese language affect the sustainability of Thai society?

These three questions are not only a case study of the commodification of Chinese in Thai society, but are also intended to shed light on a more fundamental question. From a microscopic perspective, is there a more uncritical perspective to account for the positive effects of language commodification in certain contexts?

3.1. Research Methods

In order to answer these questions, we visited Chiangmai, Thailand for a week-long period of fieldwork. Chiang Mai is an important international city in Thailand, where multilingualism can be widely observed. A mixed method approach was applied to investigate the language commodification

of Chinese as revealed in the language landscape, the linguistic beliefs of Chinese learners, and the effects during our ethnography. From the learners' perspectives, we were able to find out how the Chinese language was commodified, and investigate its meaning construction. Four research methods were implemented in our study, including linguistic landscape documentation, questionnaires, interviews, and online ethnographies, as described in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. Research methods, purpose and process.

Method	Linguistic Landscape Documentary	Questionnaires	Interviews	Online Ethnographies
RQ related	1	1,2	2,3	2,3
Aim	Analyze the commodification of Chinese in local Thai society	Describe the language beliefs of participants	To understand how interviewees perceive the meaning of Chinese language learning and its impact on their own lives.	
Process	Use of iPhone to document the linguistic landscape of Nimman Road, Chiangmai International Airport, and the Inner City	Questionnaires were distributed and collected, coded, and results were calculated.	Selected qualified interviewees, and recorded, translated, and coded their feedback	Accessed, coded, and analyzed content generated by Chinese language learners in forums, discussion groups, and other internet venues.

Our aim was to investigate the social use of Chinese in a multilingual environment through linguistic landscape documentation and analysis, to understand the local people's language beliefs through questionnaires, and finally to understand the characteristics of language beliefs about Chinese language learning through interviews and virtual ethnographies. A language belief (language ideology) is conceptualized as "a system of ideas, presuppositions, beliefs, attitudes, and values regarding languages, their status, and their use in society" [30]. By investigating the language beliefs of Chinese language learners, we can investigate how they interpret and construct Chinese language education in their local foci, in order to draw conclusions not from the current research understanding or existing theoretical hypotheses, but based on the interviewees' own perspectives.

The linguistic landscape method investigates social multilingualism by collecting and analyzing language on public signs, examining multilingualism as reflected on signs in the public sphere [29]. In our study, the local linguistic landscape exemplifies how languages including Thai, English, and Chinese were used and their relation in public domains, particularly in the service, business, and tourism arenas. In order to analyze to what extent and in which domains the commodification of Chinese was occurring, three places of major multilingual population were visited: Nimmanhaemin Road, Chiangmai International Airport, and the Inner City.

To investigate the language beliefs of Chinese language learners, a Likert scale questionnaire was given to each learner containing 15 statements inspired by Fitzsimmons-Doolan's research about language ideology in Arizona. Each statement was designed to have five levels of agreement (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree), answered by each person via self-report. This questionnaire attempts to describe language beliefs according to five dimensions: National Identity, Personal Identity, Language Rights, Globalism, and Instrumentalism, as shown in Table 2.

Interviews are a method of exploring the construction of meaning in different contexts. Through semi-structured interviews, participants reported how they perceived certain languages in their daily life experience to explain the results in our questionnaires. Particularly, as Thai nationals who attempted to learn Chinese, how they understand and construct the meaning of Chinese learning. Virtual ethnography is a useful tool for investigating language policy issues online, employing an ethnographic sensitivity that "makes explicit the taken-for-granted and often tacit ways in which people make sense of their lives" [31,32]. Through these two methods, we attempted to understand what Chinese learning means to local individual learners.

Table 2. Statements indicating interviewees' language ideology.

Category	Statements
National identity	Language represents a national identity. The law makes a language into an official language of a nation. School teachers use official language to teach.
Personal identity	Language is a person's identity. Learning a new language causes trouble for personal identity. It is a pity if my son or daughter cannot speak my native language.
Language Right	The use of language is a human right. People are encouraged to use dialects and native language. A language in danger should be saved.
Globalism	Humanity needs a common language. Some languages are dying because they are not useful. Big countries should spread their language in foreign countries.
Instrumentalism	Learning some languages can help people make more money. Languages are assets for humankind. I learn a language because it is useful for my career.
For more details please refer to Supplementary Material.	

Based on the findings from the linguistic landscape survey and the questionnaire, we were able to find out how Chinese is commodified and what language beliefs could be commonly observed, addressing RQ1. The interviews and online ethnographies allowed us to ask further questions about how the meaning of Chinese language learning is constructed for individuals, addressing RQ2 and RQ3.

3.2. Participants

Our interviewees were local Thai residents who learnt Chinese as a foreign language. We excluded interviewees who had Chinese as their first language. There were differences in age, occupation, life experience, and Chinese proficiency. A total of 12 interviewees met the criteria, as detailed in Table 3. The study of participants 1–6 was conducted through semi-structured interviews. The participants first answered the questionnaire and then the researcher expanded the questions based on the results. Participants 7–12 were studied via online ethnography. The researcher collected questionnaire data online, and recorded their discussions in online forums such as Quora and Facebook discussion groups, such as Chinese language learning (Hànyǔ xuéxí).

Table 3. Interviewees in this study.

Number	Description	Method
1	Chinese language teacher, studied in China for 4 years, Bachelor's degree in education	Interview
2	Entrepreneur who has studied and worked in China	
3	Thai Chinese descendants, owns a company	
4	High school student, studying in China	
5	High school student, studying in China	
6	High school student, studying in Thailand, preparing to study in China	
7	Businessman, has daughter studying in kindergarten	Online Ethnography
8	Primary school student	
9	Employee	
10	Employee	
11	Employee	
12	Student, grandparents were Chinese immigrants	

3.3. Data Collection

First, we sampled the linguistic landscape at three local locations, using the iPhone XS's 26 mm wide angle lens to shoot several pictures of store signs, public signage, and printed materials. We then analyzed the languages used on the signs and their relations, in order to understand the purpose and major functions that the signs, public signage, or printed materials may have in those particular places and domains.

As the Figure 1 shows, our sampling areas for the linguistic landscape were Nimman Road, the international airport, and the Inner City. These places were chosen as they are the major places of commerce, trade, and tourism in Chiangmai, where multilingual practice is commonly observed. Located in the northwest of the city, Nimman Road is an emerging commercial, service, and cultural creative district where people from different countries work and live. The airport is the major international transportation hub for the city, and its linguistic landscape represents the official attitude to language practice. Finally, the ancient Inner City is located in the heart of the city, representing a mix of temples, ancient streets, and shops that form a rich cultural landscape, attracting tourists speaking different languages.

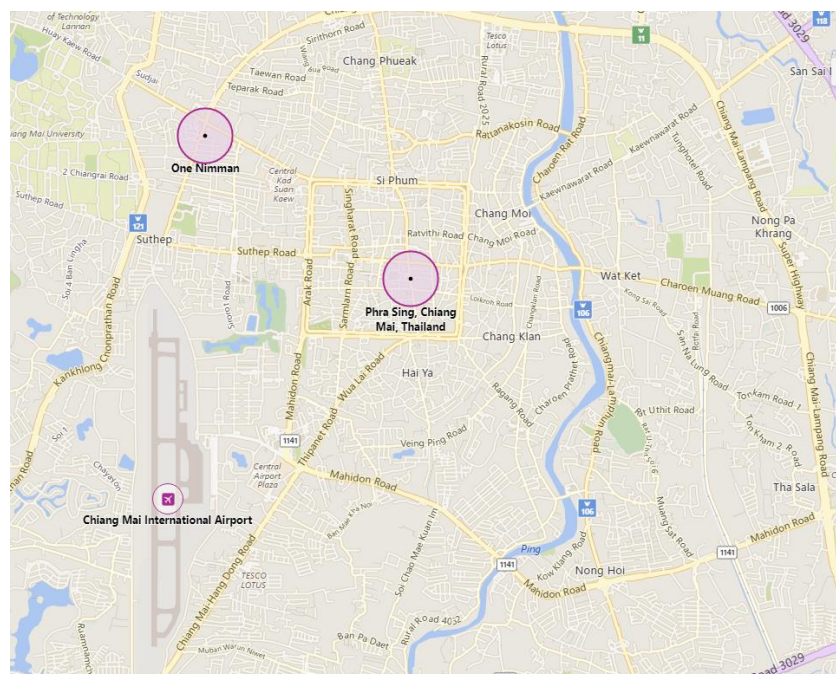


Figure 1. The sampling areas for the linguistic landscape.

Second, each interviewee completed the questionnaire detailed in Table 2, which presented Thai/Chinese bilingual versions of each statement to ensure understanding. The Thai language was translated by one senior translator and double-checked by a second one. We then coded the results into numerical data as follows: −2 (Strongly Disagree), −1 (Disagree), 0 (Neutral), +1 (Agree), +2 (Strongly Agree). From these scores we calculated the average score for each statement and category. The sample data from the Likert scales were not used to infer characteristics of the population; significance tests and correlation analyses were not conducted. The purpose was to guide the direction of the study and create a suitable space for the semi-structured interviews that follow.

Based on the results of the linguistic landscape fieldwork and the questionnaire, we focused on the common linguistic beliefs and the Chinese linguistic landscape, and we conducted interviews to discuss the impact of Chinese commodification on our participants in light of their personal experiences. Through this process, we examined the effects of linguistic commodification on social sustainability.

We asked questions in Chinese and respondents answered in Chinese or Thai which were translated by local Chinese–Thai bilinguals, and in the writing, we transcribed the data into English.

4. Findings

4.1. The Expanding Domain of Chinese Language Commodification

In the areas we visited, tourism industry signage usually appears bilingually, as shown in Figure 2. Due to the large number of tourists visiting Chiangmai in recent years, tourism has become an important industry employing many local people. Almost all tourist-related businesses in this area offer bilingual or trilingual services. As an example, One Nimman and many other emerging business areas in Chiangmai are not solely serving the local people who speak Thai only, but becoming places where multilingual activities and language commodification take place.



Figure 2. Tourist signage in One Nimman.

The picture in Figure 3 was taken in front of the Chinese school on Nimman Road. In addition to the official Confucius Institute, there are several private Chinese language schools in Chiangmai that offer Chinese language education. Interestingly, although the signboard of the Chinese school is written in Chinese and Thai, the sign above, advertising Grand Coulee real estate, is in English, while the telecommunication advertising is in Thai. This is not an isolated phenomenon; we observed that Thai is still dominant in most local-oriented businesses, and both English and Thai could be found in government departments, the Chiangmai Hospital, and other public sector areas. Chinese is limited to specific sectors, such as business, tourism, and education.



Figure 3. The signage in front of a Chinese school.

In signage related to government-funded public services, such as bus stop signs, only English and Thai could be seen, as shown in Figure 4. The Thai language is usually in a larger and more prominent font, showing the nationalist attitude of the government. Interestingly, however, in the advertisement posted by a private transport company above the bus stop sign, Chinese, English, and Thai appear simultaneously. In particular, the Chinese language is shown in red and in a larger font. This image shows different attitudes towards the private and the official in language services; official signs have historically been restricted by the Thai government regarding the status of the Chinese language, but have been more welcoming to English.

ตารางเดินรถ (Bus Schedule)			
จันทร์-ศุกร์ Monday-Friday			
สาย	จากเมืองเชียงใหม่	ไปท่าอากาศยานเชียงใหม่	กลับเมืองเชียงใหม่
1	8.00	8.20	7.30
2	8.30	8.50	7.50
3	8.00	8.20	8.20
4	10.00	10.20	11.20
5	11.00	11.20	12.20
6	12.00	12.20	01.20
7	01.00	01.20	02.20

เสาร์-อาทิตย์ Saturday-Sunday			
สาย	จากเมืองเชียงใหม่	ไปท่าอากาศยานเชียงใหม่	กลับเมืองเชียงใหม่
1	8.30	8.50	7.50
2	9.00	9.20	8.00
3	10.30	10.50	11.50
4	12.30	12.50	01.50
5	02.30	02.50	03.50
6	04.30	04.50	05.50

Figure 4. A transportation poster in the Inner City.

The airport was an exception to this rule, possibly due to the large number of Chinese tourists, which has meant that Chinese signs had to be used (see Figure 5). Here, the signage is written in Thai,

English, and Chinese, with Thai occupying the upper larger space, and English and Chinese placed side by side underneath.

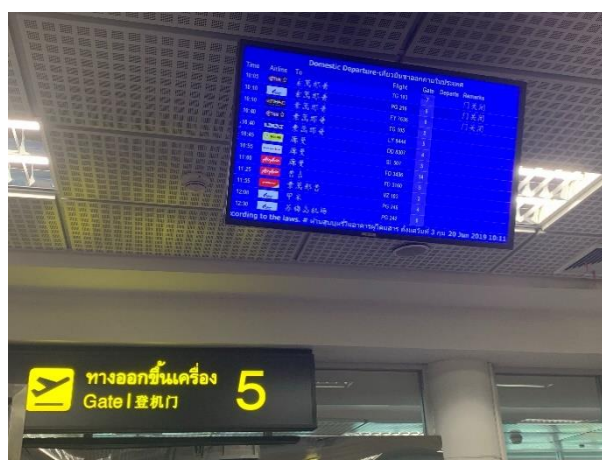


Figure 5. Airport screens and signage.

Based on our linguistic landscape documentation, Chinese was commodified in the local society, and got some exchange value in limited sectors, such as tourism, services, and business. The Chinese language proficiency of the local people we met was generally low; many only had the ability to communicate about prices and service offerings. In some hotels there were special Chinese service positions, but in the vast majority of businesses Chinese language proficiency is optional.

4.2. Ideological Feedback about Language as National Identity or Instrument

Based on our five-dimensional questionnaire, we coded the linguistic ideologies of our local Thai Chinese learners into five categories: national identity, personal identity, language rights, globalism, and instrumentalism. Each category consisted of three questions, with the raw scores used to calculate a category score based on the average of the three questions (−2, −1, 0, 1, 2). The scores for each category were then averaged and a single-factor t-test was conducted, the results of which are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Scores for each category of language ideology.

Interviewee No.	National Identity	Personal Identity	Language Rights	Globalism	Instrumentalism
1	1	−0.33333	1	−0.66667	1.66667
2	0.33333	0.33333	−0.66667	1	1
3	1	−0.33333	−1	−1	1
4	1	−0.33333	−1	1	1.66667
5	−0.33333	0.33333	1	0.33333	1.66667
6	0.66667	−1	−0.33333	1	1.66667
7	0.33333	0	−0.33333	0.66667	−1
9	1	0.66667	1	−1	1
10	−0.66667	1	1.66667	−1.66667	0.66667
11	1.33333	0	−0.66667	−0.66667	−0.66667
12	1	−0.33333	−0.66667	0.66667	1
AVERAGE	0.61	0	0	−0.0303	0.88
t-test	0.862	0.669	0.104	−0.434	2.714
p value	0.019 *	0.520	0.919	0.674	0.024 *

* $p < 0.05$; for more details please refer to Supplementary Material.

The null hypothesis is that generally participants are neutral (average = 0) in each language ideology category, but according to the t-test result our interviewees expressed their agreement strongly in the two categories labeled National identity (Average = 0.61, significance < 0.05) and Instrumentalism (average = 0.88, significance < 0.05), while there were no significant agreement or disagreement in the other three categories. This finding reveals that our interviewees defined language more in terms of national identity and in an instrumental manner, so we explored these aspects in the interviews. Interviewee 2, a start-up entrepreneur who had studied and worked in Beijing for several years, told us:

(1) Chinese has given me a lot of convenience, especially in my business. If it wasn't for the fact that I was taught to speak Chinese, a lot of business would be impossible now. The Chinese market is very big now, with a lot of tourists every year. Many of the rich people you see in Thailand are of Chinese descent, like the Central Mall and Charoen Pokphand Group ...

Here, the different social functions of language may ideologically reflect the varied definitions of first and second languages. Respondents regarded their first language, Thai, as representative of their national identity, and any additional languages, such as Chinese or English, as a tool. A representative case of this was Interviewee 3, who was middle-aged, an entrepreneur, and who had a good command of Thai and Chinese:

(2) The older generations speak southern dialects, such as Minnan and Cantonese. Our generation was adapted to the local society, and was mostly raised speaking Thai and learning Thai in school. Chinese has made it easier for me to do business, because nowadays there are many Chinese tourists, even more than white people. Many of my business customers and my business partners are from China. It (speaking Chinese) makes things very convenient.

Although he spoke both Chinese and Thai at native level, this participant chose to speak Thai in his family life because of his national identity. Like him, his family members were bilingual but spoke Thai during family communication, while Chinese was only used on business occasions when needed.

Interviewee 3 had two children, both of whom had attended high school in China and who were applying to universities in Europe and America. Both children spoke Thai, Chinese, and English. Thai was learned at home, and Chinese and English were learned at school. The younger brother, Interviewee 4, told us:

(3) My father wanted me to master Chinese, and I am now studying in China. A mastery of language could bring me more opportunities. I don't speak English well, but in order to be able to study in other countries later, I have to pass the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language).

He told us that their family language was still Thai because it was easier for communication. Although their ancestors were Chinese immigrants, their family identity was Thai. As Ueda [33] indicated:

There is a strong possibility that the number of third-generation Chinese who begin to learn the Chinese language for business reasons will increase as Thailand expands direct investment in China. Such individuals may recognize anew, through studying Chinese, that they are Chinese descendants. However, it must be stressed that it is for business reasons, not because of Chinese identity, that Chinese is studied as a foreign language in Thailand today.

Our research confirms the above statements. Historically, there have been cultural, identity, and ideological intertwining and differences between the Chinese community and Thais in Thailand, although the number of Thai Chinese language learners has increased significantly. However, the economic and instrumental value of the Chinese language is more strongly recognized than an identity basis.

4.3. The Impacts of the Commodified Chinese Language

The commodification of the Chinese language has an impact on the lives of local people, their language ideologies, and language practices. As mentioned in the literature review, previous theories have assumed that the effects of language commodification are usually negative. The spread of powerful languages in new regions often leads to local opposition, creating social injustice and threatening individual language rights. However, in our fieldwork Thai learners of Chinese as a second language did not define its spread in Thailand as a threat, but rather as an opportunity.

The most significant impact of the commodified Chinese language is that the availability and social prestige of Chinese language education has undergone a major improvement. In our survey of 12 interviewees, only two of them (#1 and #6) had been educated in the official Confucius Institute or Classroom, which are typically seen as the official Chinese language education organization. Other interviewees were attracted not by the official initiative, but out of their personal need for education opportunities, career development, or family communication.

(4) In the past, the reason for learning Chinese was that there were Chinese people in the family, but there weren't many opportunities to use it in life. Now things are different. In the past, there were not many places to learn Chinese, and teaching Chinese is now more accessible than ever. Learners of Chinese in the past would think that Chinese is inferior to English, but today it is different.

In Chiangmai, the official Chinese language education institute at Chiangmai University, run by Hanban, offers elective Chinese language courses for university students, but those who are not connected with the university can also learn Chinese in privately-funded training schools or by self-study. As the instrumental value of Chinese language is gradually increasing (deepening the commodification of the language), learners have been able to achieve more sustainable personal development and better family communication through language tutoring. This situation is not a compulsory education goal set by the government or schools, but is driven by agency from individuals:

(5) Chinese is considered to be an important language in the future, and I was asked to learn Chinese in primary school, but in high school I voluntarily chose to learn Chinese. I chose to study Chinese because I believe I will use it in the future, for example, in my daily life, at school and in travel.

This interviewee, who is only 14 years old, explained that learning Chinese was no longer a school requirement but rather a voluntary choice, because she recognized that Chinese could benefit her education, work, and travel in the future. For many local low-income families, learning the Chinese language means better access to higher education, which is the basis for changing their career paths in favor of better opportunities. Because of the Study in China policy and abundant scholarships, some Thai students who would otherwise not be able to afford to attend higher education may obtain funding and the opportunity to attend college. Interviewee 6 told us:

(6) Chinese is important, the Chinese economy is big, and if I graduate, I might be economically independent. I need the scholarship because I don't want to bother Mom and Dad for the tuition.

Interviewee 6 is currently enrolled in a local high school, but his family cannot afford the expensive tuition fees for Thai universities due to their insufficient income. Therefore, learning Chinese and getting a scholarship to study in China represented his best chance to pursue higher education.

According to statistics, the annual income of Thai families in 2017 was about US\$3322 (around 105,000 baht), with tuition fees for local students ranging from about 13,000 baht to 18,000 baht per semester depending on the majors and schools, and over 40,000 baht per semester for private universities. This cost is expensive for an average family, and prohibitive for low-income families. Thai students who have passed the HSK exam have the opportunity to apply for Chinese universities

without tuition, receiving scholarships to cover their living expenses. This policy provides low-income families with critical opportunities to further their education, career development, and living standards.

Chinese language education and tutoring is not such an expensive investment as learning English, and children from low-income families may be better able to afford it. In the case of the Confucius Institute at Chiangmai University, for example, a 30 h Chinese language learning course costs 2100 baht (about \$66), or an average of 70 baht per hour (just over \$2). In comparison, the Thai TOEFL exam costs \$195 (over 6000 baht). As a result, most students who are able to pass the TOEFL in Thailand and study in the US are necessarily from wealthy families, while students of lower income families are unlikely to be able to afford. In this case, Chinese language education serves to provide more affordable and more equitable access to higher education.

The commodification of Chinese has also had an impact on the career development of employees. Interviewees #2, #3, #9, #10, and #11 agreed that learning the Chinese language had improved their working performance. The commodification of the Chinese language may be observed in the trade, tourism, and service industries, where language competence helps employees to better serve customers and thus increases their human capital:

(7) I started learning Chinese while working in Bangkok. After graduating from the south for 1 to 2 months, I started working as a clerk at Khun A in Bangkok. Khun himself would study Chinese in his spare time at night, because he had Chinese relatives in his family. He thought I should learn Chinese as well, as it will become an international language in the future. The Chinese are investing more in Thailand, and the various future job opportunities will be better.

As we observed in Chiangmai, a new local market was emerging for Chinese language education and training, with employees providing instructional services able to earn their living because of their language skills. Due to yearly growth in Chinese tourism and commerce, the Chinese language increases the human capital of employees in workplace. Some hotels and restaurants even employ special service positions that identify Zhōngwén fúwù (Chinese language services) as an advantage.

5. Discussion

Our case study has focused on the commodification of the Chinese language in Thai social and economic contexts. Heller [11] indicated that as products of modernity, some domains such as tourism, translation, marketing, and language teaching have particular salience for illustrating the ways in which language commodification is involved in the symbolic dimensions of added value. In these domains, which are products of the new economy, language acts as a resource to be produced, controlled, distributed, and constrained.

Our study has confirmed that in Chiang Mai, Thailand, the Chinese language has been commodified in tourism, commerce, and language education. In the current literature, it usually implies a linguistic imperialist conception involving social inequality and an imbalance of resources. However, we do not interpret our findings from this critical perspective, but rethink the relation between a commodified language and social sustainability. As UNESCO [20,21] indicated 17 Education for Sustainable Development Goals, our survey found that two of these goals could be observed in our data: SDG4 (ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) and SDG8 (promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all). In their feedback, our participants were able to recognize the importance of their own skills for improving their life, in particular for employment and entrepreneurship. Meanwhile, they are able to develop a vision and plans for their own economic life based on an analysis of their competencies and contexts from the experience of learning a second language.

From a more comparative perspective, an important point in relation to the global commodification of English is that English is often not confined to specific domains; rather, it often changed the local

linguistic ecology or influenced official language policies [34]. The globalization of English embodies capitalism and materiality, with resource, privilege, and symbolic power legitimating its hegemony [35]. In the context of Thailand, for example, English-speaking international schools, with their successful marketing and high-end pricing, have become a symbolic label for the wealthy.

Some critical opinions indicated that Chinese international education could be a new colonial policy that is aimed at increasing Chinese soft power and influence [36]. However, this view misunderstands the essence of colonialist language policy, wherein many former colonial countries and regions saw the local linguistic ecology changed into a diglossia system or be completely shifted into the language of the colonizer. In our observation, Chinese as a language is more instrumental than identity-based, as Li [37] concluded, historically the main drivers for the Chinese language learning outside of China have been culture and immigration, but currently the main driver is economic.

Inequity of resources and educational opportunities represents a challenge to sustainable social development in Thailand today [38,39]. This suggests a rethink of the more socio-economic aspects of language commodification, particularly the relationship between language and inequality, which should be examined at a micro level. In our view, the commodification of languages may not be the cause of linguistic ecological imbalances, but there may be mediating factors, such as the governmental language management, the social legitimating of the superior language status or the individual language ideology that make the difference. A commodified language could not necessarily be responsible for today's challenge of the language ecology, but more micro and empirical evidence are needed.

The methodological innovations in the study of language commodification are crucial for the theoretical innovation. Blommaert [40] argues that the sociolinguistics of globalization needs to more focus on the micro-level of language, examining language use and its relation to social construction. This micro-turn in sociolinguistic theory requires methodological innovation, such as a more ethnographic approach. Our study explores the mix methods of Likert scale and ethnographic survey. Meanwhile, as the landscape is not simply a physical space, but an ideological construct [41], we applied the linguistic landscape data as a psychosocial projection, which is an interesting methodological attempt to link between self-reported data and the linguistic landscape.

6. Conclusions

This paper has examined the language commodification of Chinese as revealed in Chiangmai's local linguistic landscape, the current linguistic belief of Chinese learners, and some of the possible impacts of commodification on social sustainability.

The linguistic landscape data revealed that Chinese language commodification is taking place in commerce, business, and tourism. The ideological feedback indicated that our interviewees interpreted language as part of their national identity (L1), or as an instrument (L2). As a commodified language, the use of Chinese was restricted to specific domains and had limited proficiency in today's multilingual Chiangmai, where the Thai language and dialects still dominate and construct the national identity. In our interpretation, the commodified L2 could be an additional resource rather than a threat to social sustainability due to its limited use and domains in the local context.

This study provides a microscopic overview at the commodification of a second language in a nation-state. From a more learner's perspective, we explore the construction of the meaning of language education, which may present new insights into understanding its relation and impacts in the late modernity. Although the major literature takes a more critical perspective regarding language commodification as a threat to social justice, we take a different view, suggesting that the relation between a commodified language and the social sustainability could be more dynamic, which needs more micro and empirical evidence.

As Hesse-Biber [42] argues, current practices of mixed methods research favor quantitative methodologies over qualitative methods, our research adopted a more qualitatively driven approach to understand how local Chinese language learners make meaning of language from their individual

experience. Since some participants benefited from Chinese language education and study abroad experience in China, our study may have data bias and underestimate the negative impact. Our focus is to rethink the relation between language commodification and social sustainability, on which we wish to open up space for the future research.

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