

Suppression on Paper, Suffering in Real Life: How Language Ideology in Nationalistic Policies Shaped the Literacy Experiences of Thai Chinese in Thailand

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KEYWORDS

language ideology; literacy experience; nationalism; Chinese literacy; Thai Chinese

“The government did not want people to learn Chinese because they were afraid that people would become communists. They stigmatized Chinese literates as communists.”

Wantani, an 83 year old Thai Chinese woman, reflects on her struggles to acquire Chinese literacy due to school closures and limited Chinese language classes during the nationalistic campaign. She recalls “communists” as a taboo word that people in her past did not want to associate with. Wantani’s story is similar to other Thai Chinese participants in this study (Jeng, Suwat, and Lina) who attended Chinese schools during Phibun’s nationalistic campaigns in 1940s-1960s. This historically situated qualitative study focuses on how literacies as written texts affected people’s literacy practices, particularly in acquiring Chinese literacy. In this paper, I aim to answer these questions:

1. To what extent were xenophobic ideologies embedded in the literacy-related policies?
2. How were these ideologies enacted in Chinese schools and Chinese classes?
3. How did Thai Chinese participants navigate their language and literacy experiences during periods of Thai nationalism?

The participants’ stories show how negative ideology towards Chinese literacy, driven by the nationalistic policies, interrupted their Chinese literacy acquisition and disparaged their Chinese identity. Examining the language and literacy experiences of these Thai-Chinese allows us to understand how written policies intersect with participants’ lived experience.

In the next section, I define the meaning and present the framework of language ideology used in this study. The framework, proposed by Terrence Wiley and Marguerite Lukes, includes three ideologies: monolingual, standard ideology, and individual ideology. After discussing how these ideologies are associated, I describe historical and political context of Thai Chinese in Thailand and the connection among Thailand, the US, and China before explaining research methodology. Then, I demonstrate the evidence of suppression in the state’s policies and introduce the participants’ stories. I end this article by discussing the connection between written texts and literacy practices and how national ideologies that influence personal lived experiences are connected to global politics.

LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY

I conceptualize language ideology as “a dynamic and evolving set of beliefs about a language that encapsulates its perceived power, value, and functional roles within specific social and cultural contexts.”

This definition derives from the meaning of ideology as discussed in various fields. From an anthropological perspective, language ideologies are socially constructed and heavily influenced by political factors. Kathryn Woolard, for instance, considers language ideologies as moral and political representations of language structure and use, linking them to identities, institutions, and values. In applied linguistics, language ideologies permeate almost all aspects of language usage, shaping how people conceptualize language categories and individual languages (Seargeant). Linguistics focuses on the relational dynamics among language, speakers, and context, discussing how ideologies are embedded in social practices and interactions. Philip Seargeant notes that ideology can be understood as a system of beliefs and ideas that operates at various levels, from national language policies to everyday language interactions, to rationalize and justify the structure and use of language within a society. Ideology also reflects and perpetuates social, political, and economic power dynamics (Seargeant). In my work, I take the aspect of political representations of language that connects to one’s identity and value from anthropology while being mindful of the dynamic between language and social practices from the linguistic perspective. I also consider the meanings of language ideology that people in composition and rhetoric have discussed.

From a rhetorical viewpoint, I adapt the connection between individual and communal ideologies from Shirley Brice Heath’s definition of language ideology: “the self-evident ideas and objectives a group holds concerning roles of language in the social experiences of members as they contribute to the expression of the group” (53, cited in Irvine 4). I also reference how Bambi Schieffelin, Kathryn Woolard, and Paul Kroskrity link the role of the state in establishing language ideology in society. These definitions connect individual ideology to broader contexts, including communal and national ideologies, and show the influence they have on one another, as James Berlin addresses: ideology provides “the language to define the subject (the self), other subjects, the material world, and the relation of all of these to each other” (478). In other words, Berlin addresses that all our communication points toward our values, beliefs, relationships, and identities—what we hold to be “true,” “right,” and “normal” (479). This understanding acknowledges the fluid and contextual nature of language ideologies, emphasizing how they are shaped by and reflect the socio-political landscapes in which they exist. Building upon these definitions, I define Chinese literacy ideology in this study as “a dynamic and evolving set of beliefs about Chinese literacy that encapsulates its perceived power, value, and functional roles within specific social and cultural contexts.”

In composition studies, the focus of language ideology tends to be on standardized language ideologies (Aull), which emphasize the American English standard over other Englishes and other languages and dialects. My research aims to explore language ideology outside of the English-dominant context, seeking to expand the conceptualization of language ideology beyond Western

epistemology. It looks at the Chinese language ideology in Thailand, focusing on the national policies related to literacies, and connects how written policies were translated into actions and how these actions affected people's experience of acquiring Chinese literacy.

To analyze this phenomenon, I adopt Terrence Wiley and Marguerite Lukes' framework of ideologies in US English-only policies. Although this framework was introduced nearly 30 years ago with a focus on the US context, the concept is transferable to the segregated layers of ideologies instilled in Thailand and other societies. Three main ideologies Wiley and Lukes discuss are:

1. Monolingual ideology: This ideology reflects the preference for a single language for a nation. The monolingual ideology in this study refers to a dominant language ideology of acquiring only the Thai language, as proposed by the government.
2. Standard language ideology: This ideology "elevates a particular variety of a named language spoken by the dominant social group to a high status while diminishing other varieties to a low status" (Ferguson). For instance, standardized language ideologies, as discussed by Laura Aull, prioritize a standard form of English over other dialects and languages, shaping how individuals perceive and value different languages. For my research, the use of Mandarin as the language of instruction in Chinese schools outside of China and the use of Central Thai as the official language of Thailand are examples of standard language ideology.
3. Individual Ideology: This ideology examines how personal attitudes toward language are shaped by dominant social ideologies, which has received insufficient attention in the existing literature, and it will be the focus of this article.

My study examines how monolingual and standard ideologies impact individual ideology, reflecting how societal attitudes, influenced by standard language ideologies, affect how individuals value different languages and literacies. Language ideologies typically address power relations in binary terms—oppressor versus oppressed. I argue these dynamics are more nuanced, involving multiple layers of power and influence. My research expands the understanding of nationalist language suppression beyond the focus on English-only policies in the US or solely on national policy in other contexts. It connects individuals' language ideologies to broader themes like Thai nationalism, Chinese communism, and global political conflicts. Thus, it is essential to first understand the historical and political context of Thai Chinese in Thailand, as well as the relationship between Thailand, the US, and China.

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THAI CHINESE IN THAILAND

Thailand is chosen as the study area because of its unique historical status and the misconceptions people may have about its language ideology. Thailand is one of the few Asian countries not to have experienced colonization by a Western country, setting its context apart from studies done in colonized nations (Simpson and Thammasathien 392). Moreover, Thailand has the largest Chinese population outside China (Stuart-Fox), with 15-20% of the total Thai population estimated to have significant Chinese heritage (Morita). Many scholars (Morita; Skinner, for example) believe that the

shift in language use in Thai Chinese communities comes from assimilation, a natural process of how immigrants are gradually trained and adjusted to integrate into a new host community. However, I argue that Chinese assimilation to Thai was not natural but was instead forced through various policies, a claim I will demonstrate later.

The history of Chinese people in Thailand dates back at least to the 13th century, beginning with trade between China and Ayutthaya. At that time, the relationship between Thailand and China was considered a good business partnership. The number of Chinese immigrants increased significantly after King Taksin, the son of a Chinese immigrant, ruled Thailand between 1767 and 1782. The Chinese heritage of the King of Thailand encouraged the influx of Chinese to Thailand. Moreover, with the economic recession, unemployment, and drought during the civil war in China, many Chinese, particularly Chinese men, left China for Thailand for jobs and growth opportunities. The population of Chinese immigrants increased from 230,000 in 1825 to 792,000 by 1910 (Stuart-Fox). Most of the Chinese who arrived in Thailand settled in Bangkok and along the coast of the Gulf of Siam (Sombatsiri 22). Neither the Thai government nor the monarchy interfered with the use of Chinese dialects, and there was no push to assimilate the Chinese into Thai society. Chinese people had their own communities, and no restrictions were imposed on them, either in business or education.

However, the perception of Chinese people in Thailand shifted during the reign of King Rama VI who was educated in Europe and embraced Western ideals. He viewed the hard work and determination of the Chinese community in Thailand as problematic, especially their rise in business sectors, which gave them more power to control the country's business. He referred to the Chinese people as "the Jews of the East." With that fear, he responded by implementing three strategies aiming to control the Chinese population. First, he granted noble titles to influential Chinese officials to encourage their identification with Thai identity and foster pride in serving under the Thai monarchy. Second, he enacted the National Act of 1913, which established *jus soli* citizenship, granting Thai citizenship to any child born in Thailand, detaching Chinese descendants from China. Lastly, he issued the Private School Act of 1918, forcing private schools, including Chinese schools, to follow a government curriculum, mandating using Thai as the language of instruction and instructing Thai history and culture to promote loyalty to the nation. These strategies instigated the assimilation process, which continued even as political power shifted from the monarchy to a military leader in the 1930s. The goals to control and assimilate Chinese people in Thailand remained unchanged. In fact, the Chinese community was affected more intensely (Chansiri 69), with more concrete policies and actions from the nationalist leader and the worldwide fear of communism. In this study, I highlight the most suppressive time for the Chinese people in Thailand, from the 1940s to the 1960s, due to both the nationalistic agenda of the Thai government and international conflicts. Field Marshal Plaek Pibunsongkhram (hereafter referred to as Phibun) was the prime minister of Thailand between 1936 and 1960; his regime sought to purify the Thai language and culture by proposing intense nationalistic policies. Phibun changed the country's name from Siam to Thailand to signify the unity of the Thai people. He mandated that Thais salute the flag, learn the revised national anthem, and speak Thai, among other measures. The promotion of a Thai identity--having Thai ethnicity, being

proud of Thai culture, and using the Thai language—led to the marginalization of those who were not in these categories (Pienkhuntod).

In addition to the nationalistic policies, the global political context during the Phibun regime, with the growing relationship between Thailand and the US—who was on the opposite end of the political spectrum from China—resulted in more negative perceptions of China, its people, and the Chinese language. The educational and language restrictions were more intense during World War II (1939-1945), when the Phibun government allied with Japan, which was the enemy of China. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Thailand viewed China with suspicion and concern because of the spread of communism, leading to strained relations and restrictive policies against Chinese immigrants. This was intensified after World War II, when China closed its doors to the world and the US saw Thailand as a critical ally to counter the spread of communism (Baker and Phongpaichit). The US then provided substantial economic aid and promoted educational exchange, technical assistance, and military support to Thailand, contributing to making Thailand a staunchly anti-communist country (Sng and Bisalputra).

As a result, the promotion of Thai nationalism in this study is intertwined global tensions between democracy and communism. The global influence supported both monolingual and standardize ideologies in the nation, fueling the assimilation of “the other.” However, the individual ideologies and stories will be highlighted because of their lack of representation in academic space and national history. To further explore the connections between national policies and individual experiences within these international conflicts, I outline the methods used in this study before presenting written policies and the stories of the individuals.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

In this article, I select stories from four individuals out of the 20 people I interviewed between November 2022 and January 2023. The selected participants are all Chinese descendants who holds Thai citizenship. They self-identify as Thai Chinese¹ with Teochew heritage.² They were born in Thailand to either Chinese parents or a Chinese father and a Thai mother. Their ages range from 71 to 83 years old. I chose these four individuals because they attended Chinese school during Phibun's nationalistic policies. They come from two families from two different provinces in Central Thailand, outside of Bangkok. I intentionally selected areas with fewer Chinese communities to illustrate the broader reach of the nationalist campaign and how these policies affect people with less Chinese community contact and support. I chose Wantani, the only child left from her family, to represent a woman's experience, which was less common in educational settings at that time. Jeng, Suwat, and Lina are from the same family; the reflections of siblings aim to demonstrate the long-lasting impact of the Thai policies. The names of the participants are pseudonyms, and their background information is presented here, starting with the oldest participant.

Wantani is 83 years old. She was born to Chinese immigrants who had been living in Thailand for more than 30 years. She is the eldest child and had five siblings, all of whom have passed away.

Wantani attended Chinese school from 1948 to 1954.

Jeng is 78 years old. He is the eldest son of a Thai Chinese mother and a Chinese father. He has eight siblings; two of them—the oldest and the youngest—have passed away. He attended Chinese school from 1952 to 1958.

Suwat is 73 years old and Jeng's younger brother. He attended the same Chinese school four years after Jeng, from 1956 to 1960, during the final two years of the Phibun regime.

Lina is 71 years old. She is a sister of Jeng and Suwat and attended a Chinese school from 1958 to 1962, during the last phase of the nationalist policy periods. Because the other three siblings are younger than Lina and attended school after Phibun's period, they were excluded from this study.

Methods and Data Collection

In this study, I use archival research and narrative inquiry to collect the data. I went to the National Archives of Thailand to gather documents related to Thai nationalist educational and language policies. Then, I read these documents to find information related to Chinese literacy. These archival materials reveal the ideologies in the state's written policies, which I used to confirm the ideologies and practices of individual literacy experiences.

To obtain the participants' stories, I used snowball sampling to recruit participants, starting with an informal conversation with my uncle, who attended a Chinese school. He introduced me to Wantani and Jeng. I met with each participant and invited them to share their stories, focusing on their experiences learning Chinese in Chinese schools. Although I interviewed people on these specific topics, the process and direction of the interviews were open for the participants to direct their own narratives. I began nearly every interview with the question: "Could you tell me about your experience learning Chinese in Chinese schools?" The interviews were conducted in Thai and lasted from 30 minutes to two hours. The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent.

Data Analysis

After the interviews, I transcribed the recordings and conducted multiple readings of the transcripts to identify recurring themes. I employed manual thematic coding to analyze what language ideology the participants have towards Chinese language based on their beliefs and perceptions of Chinese literacy in terms of its power, value, and functions within their lives and society.

I chose not to use any coding software for this analysis or tease these stories apart by grouping them based on themes. Instead, I examined each narrative individually, selecting quotes and parts of their experiences, and arranging them chronologically to capture the evolution of their experiences learning Chinese in such a suppressive educational environment. I intended to appreciate these individual stories, rather than reducing the narratives to linguistic cues or generalizing these unique experiences. From my observation, the recurring themes in the participants' experiences acquiring Chinese literacy during the Phibun's periods are the closure of the school, the restricted hours of Chinese classes, the promotion of Thai language, the tutoring sessions at home, and the limited use of Chinese outside of the classroom. After organizing the stories sequentially, I selected a few relevant quotes from each participant to highlight their voices. I then translated all the information into

English and reread it to ensure the accuracy of the information and the interpretation of the stories.

I use the concept of narrative inquiry to collect and analyze the interviews. Narrative inquiry is a methodological approach to understanding people's representations of the world through the stories they tell. These stories portray participants' selected memories, which give the narrators agency over what stories and values they feel comfortable sharing (Guerra 77). This method provides "a rhetorical platform for interlocutors to explore their relationships with one another and with the uncontrollable forces in their lives" (Yam 39). Mary Maynes, Jennifer Pierce, and Barbara Laslett emphasize that personal narrative analysis provides deep insights into social phenomena by exploring individual experiences and the meanings, motivations, and feelings that shape actions within specific social contexts. This approach highlights the complexity of human agency and the interplay between individual and social factors over time. Since the participants' experiences in this study were tied to political decisions which they had no control, I gave them the agency to tell their stories and explain how they comprehended their experiences. In other words, narrative inquiry is a way to see history through memories and stories of these participants.

Narrative inquiry is a powerful method for exploring the complexities of human experience and social phenomena, particularly narratives in family contexts that are complex and multifaceted (Mertova and Webster; De Fina and Georgakopoulou). Anna De Fina and Alexandra Georgakopoulou view narratives as social practices that connect micro-level interactions with broader social processes. They emphasize the importance of understanding narratives within their socio-cultural and historical contexts, and how they shape and are shaped by social practices, which align with my goals for this study to connect personal stories to national policies. Narrative inquiry also amplifies voices or narratives that may have remained unheard (Trahar). It fosters a more inclusive and democratic historical account (Duffy) by allowing participants to narrate their stories in their own words. After analyzing the participants' stories, I reread the documents I found and identified connections between written texts and practiced literacies.

In the next section, I present four documents related to language and literacy to illustrate the nationalistic policies in Thailand during Phibun's periods. These documents reveal monolingual and standardized ideologies embedded in the policies. I highlight key points on how Chinese was perceived and how Chinese literacy ideology was addressed in these documents before demonstrating how these ideologies were enacted in Chinese schools and remembered by the participants.

CHINESE LITERACY IDEOLOGY IN DOCUMENTS

The four documents are evidence of the nationalistic agenda, revealing how monolingual and standardized ideologies were used against the Chinese language, leading to the suppressive environment of Chinese literacy in Thailand. These four documents are the 12 Cultural Mandates; the Private School Act; "Chinese School," issued by the Office of the Secretariat of the Cabinet, Ministry of Education; and "Implementation of Operation Order No. 5 Regarding Policies on Chinese and Chinese Descendants in Thailand."³ I discuss each document respectively.

Mandate 9 in the 12 Cultural Mandates, published in the *Royal Gazette* on June 24, 1940, stated

that Thai people must praise, honor, and respect the Thai language, and must feel honored to speak it and consider it the duty of good citizens to study the national language and instruct those who do not yet understand their duty (Office of the Prime Minister). The mandate aimed to promote pride in being Thai through the use of the central Thai language. These requirements objectify the Thai language as a high-value asset, instead of something to practice or use in communication, which is supposed to be the main function of language. The mandate encourages people to perceive and believe that language is something to “respect and honor,” which can create pride when using the “preferred language” and instill fear of using other languages. As a result, individuals feel compelled to adopt the state’s monolingual and standardized ideologies in their daily interactions. The mandate exemplifies how language becomes a mechanism of political, social, and economic control and stratification (Wiley and Lukes 512). The final section of the mandate, which focuses on studying the national language and instructing others as a duty of good citizen, aligns with Amy Wan’s research that emphasizes the use of literacy to cultivate a “good citizen.” This mandate promotes monolingualism and standardization, politicizing language use and literacies of whoever deviates from the monolingual norm. Implementing these policies could suppress other languages and dialects, emphasizing the superiority of standardized Thai and creating a social hierarchy (Wongsurawat 31). Establishing linguistic hierarchies placed a crucial role on language and literacy in constructing homogeneity and boundaries of the nation. By bringing some people into citizenship through language policy, it eventually excludes others. This document shows how the government attempted to assimilate Chinese immigrants and their descendants through use of the Thai language, particularly in educational settings.

Besides the national cultural mandates, Phibun also launched a revision of the Private School Acts that had specific requirements, aiming to control the operations of Chinese schools and curtail the spread of the perceived language of communism. In the Private School Act, which was revised multiple times between 1936 and 1954 (Skinner), articles 9 and 10 stated that a school’s principal and teachers must have proficiency in the Thai language up to the standard set by the ministry (Legislative Institutional Repository), but the standard was not clearly indicated in the document. Article 19 directed private school managers and principals not only to teach students to read and write Thai fluently but to ensure that they understood the duties of good citizens, especially loyalty to Thailand. All instructions and documents had to be in Thai, and all syllabi, schedules, and textbooks had to conform to the regulations of the Ministry of Education, as pointed out in articles 20 and 23. (Legislative Institutional Repository). These regulations were the tools the government used either to close the Chinese schools or to force the schools to close themselves.

In addition to the mandate and the Private School Act, negative ideologies towards Chinese literacy were also laid out in “Chinese School,” a document issued by the Office of the Secretariat of the Cabinet, Ministry of Education, dated March 1950. The Ministry of Education responded to the Ministry of Interior’s comments on Chinese classes in public schools as a violation of the Primary Education Act and all Chinese schools should be supervised. This restriction indicates that those involved in the country’s internal affairs were afraid of China and viewed Chinese schools as sites for the operation of Chinese communism. The regulations already in place—limited hours of teaching

Chinese and a Thai supervising committee--were requested by the Ministry of Interior to be enforced more strictly. The requests reinforced the image of Chinese literacy as an unwelcome practice that no one should associate with. The Minister of Education agreed with the Ministry of Interior's request, believing that teaching Chinese geography and history, even as elective courses, would allow Chinese teachers to tempt the students to become Chinese communists, causing them to lose their loyalty to Thailand and become a great threat to the country.

The negative ideologies towards the Chinese language and China were also present in the last document included in this article: "Implementation of Operation Order No. 5 Regarding Policies on Chinese and Chinese Descendants in Thailand," issued around 1965. The document was stamped as "secret," and it explicitly labeled Chinese people and their language as problems to be managed (Ministry of Finance). The confidentiality of the document implied both urgency and covert measures to restrict Chinese literacy. Many measures were requested by the Council of Notational Security in this document. One was to "limit the use of Chinese language and Chinese media" as part of a long-term policy to assimilate Chinese descendants. The restriction of Chinese language use was enforced

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in the form of limiting levels of Chinese literacy and reducing the number of hours of Chinese language classes per week. These limitations signaled that Chinese literacy was either unnecessary or unwanted. Other measures stated in this document focus on Chinese schools. They clearly stated that the government must not allow more Chinese schools to be established and must close any existing Chinese schools as soon as they violated any part of the law. Measures also restrict

the teaching of Chinese language to only some schools and not at all in primary education, and they asked officials to be stricter with regulations in Chinese hours, Chinese teachers, and Chinese teaching both in schools and tutoring sessions outside of the schools. These measures imply the state's fear and demonstrate the ideology of the government viewing Chinese literacy as unwanted, or worse—dangerous—and they aim to replace it with Thai language and Thai literacy. The documents reveal the consistent message of not only a lack of appreciation for Chinese literacy but also an underlying fear of it. As a result, the government needed to control the spread of Chinese literacy.

These policies share a broader trend similar to monolingual and standardized practices seen in the US, which often suppress native languages, varieties of English, and other non-English languages (Baker-Bell; Cushman; Kynard; Prendergast; Pritchard; Powell; Young). Situated in a non-English context, this study expands the perception of monolingual ideology, like English-only policy, into

a “dominant language only” ideology. It also shows that the dominant and non-dominant language ideologies are complicated by a layer of entanglement of a national language like Thai and a global language like Mandarin, and of the political relationships between Thailand and the bigger players on the global stage like the US and China.

To further develop this argument, I position my study alongside Catherine Prendergast’s “Buying into English,” which examines how global trends and preferences shape a nation’s language ideology. Prendergast’s work showed that the rise of English infiltrates a country’s language ideology; it has been accompanied by a perception of linguistic superiority that often marginalizes other languages. This phenomenon was present in Thai nationalistic policies promoting Thai language, and it was intensified by Thailand’s relationship with the US. As the US pursued an anti-communist agenda, Thailand sided with it, leading to negative associations with the Chinese language and Chinese people in Thailand. These negative ideologies toward China and Chineseness are rooted in a complex interplay of Thailand’s nationalism and geopolitical dynamics. While English is positioned as a tool of modernity and progress, Chinese language and literacy are often relegated to the shadows of suspicion. This relationship illustrates the connections and influences between countries, and how they shape language ideologies and literacy campaigns in Thailand. During the nationalist regime, the government not only mandated the use of Thai language and promoted Thai culture, but they also suggested that reading, writing, or speaking Chinese, associating with Chinese individuals, or identifying as Chinese was dangerous. This raises a question about how Thai Chinese students navigate their language and literacy in such a hostile context. By exploring their language and literacy experiences, we can gain valuable insights into the relationship between written policies and lived realities, as well as the long-term effects of a suppressive environment on individual ideologies.

CHINESE LITERACY IDEOLOGY IN LIVED EXPERIENCE

This section focuses on how written policies manifested in the lived experiences of Thai Chinese who attended Chinese schools during the 1940s-1960s. During this period, the participants experienced similar restrictions: Chinese schools were closed, classes were only allowed to be taught from grades one to four, and the hours of Chinese lessons were limited to six hours per week. I arranged the stories in sequence of participants’ ages to show the lengthy periods of Chinese literacy suppression and the evolving literacy experiences of the individuals, starting with the oldest participant in this study: Wantani.

Wantani

Wantani, 83, grew up in a household where Thai and Teochew were spoken. Wantani attended this school from 1948 to 1954, during the second phase of Phibun’s nationalism campaign. However, the curriculum included Thai, Mandarin, and English classes, with most subjects taught in Thai. During this time, at the end of World War II and the onset of the Cold War, her school was abruptly closed. Officials cited safety concerns for the closure of the school, but Wantani sensed there was more to the story. “It wasn’t actually about safety,” she recalled. “When the school reopened, Thai

lessons and other subjects resumed as usual, but Chinese classes were paused indefinitely, and that was without any official announcement.” Her teacher told her that Chinese classes would reopen when it was “appropriate,” meaning with government approval, which did not come for years.

The closure of the school interrupted and delayed Wantani’s Chinese literacy development. She had been learning Chinese for less than a year when her education was disrupted. “The government did not want people to learn Chinese because they were afraid that people would become communists. They stigmatized Chinese literates as communists,” Wantani explained, “and everyone was afraid of communists at that time,” her voice tinged with the frustration of those years. For Wantani, this was a pivotal moment. She realized that Chinese languages, whether Mandarin or her heritage language, were not valued by the state.

The nationalistic policy promoting Thai as the preferred language, combined with the Private School Act that closed Chinese schools, created an environment where speaking Chinese evoked fear and stigma. In Wantani’s experience, Chinese literacy was associated with communism. The government viewed the connection of these Chinese families to their ancestral homeland as a potential threat to national security, associating the Chinese language with communist ideologies. This association caused Wantani to doubt her own identity and belonging in society. Not only were Wantani’s Chinese lessons interrupted, but the school also required the use of the Thai language everywhere, leaving minimal or no opportunities for Chinese descendants to practice Chinese in school. The enforcement of these policies created an environment where Chinese descendants felt pressured to conform to the state’s monolingual policies. Because of these restrictions, Wantani’s father, a Chinese immigrant who had settled in Thailand for over 30 years and who valued Mandarin as a connection to their ancestral homeland, hired a private tutor for Wantani and her siblings to continue their Chinese education at home.

“Every day, I had Mandarin tutoring for one or two hours at home,” Wantani recalled. This private tutoring was a way for her family to preserve their cultural heritage despite the suppressive policies. However, her siblings and friends were not as enthusiastic. “Some of my friends even said that taking lessons or speaking Mandarin was pretentious,” she says, shaking her head. They saw no practical use for Mandarin and wanted to distance themselves from any association with communism. Even though Wantani felt pride in maintaining her heritage language, she also felt the distance it created between her friends who did not study Mandarin and herself. These reflections highlight the internal conflict and emotional toll these policies had on individuals.

For Wantani, her ability to read and write Mandarin was not only a way to preserve her ancestral language, but it also helped her handle business deals with Chinese merchants in Bangkok when she and her husband ran their store. “I attended more Mandarin lessons than anyone else at school,” she said with a smile, “and that’s why I could take care of all the paperwork.” Her pride highlights the importance she placed on her literacy and the practical benefits it provided.

However, after she passed the business to her son many years ago, Wantani’s proficiency began to wane due to a lack of practice and everyday use. At one point during the interview, she shyly mentioned that her Mandarin was fading away because she didn’t have many opportunities to use it anymore. “It was embarrassing,” she admitted. “I felt my Chinese was slipping away.” Her reflection

demonstrates the internalized guilt she felt as a Chinese individual who could no longer speak fluent Chinese, which also reveals the connection Wantani drew between her language, literacy, and identity. These moments from Wantani's interview illustrate the emotional journey she experienced

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regarding her Mandarin proficiency. Her pride in her language skills was shaped by her ability to contribute to her family's business, demonstrating the practical value of her Chinese literacy. Conversely, the government's policies, which limited Chinese language education and associated it with communism, created an environment where practicing Mandarin became increasingly difficult. This led to her proficiency declining and her feeling embarrassed and guilty about her diminishing language skills. The societal pressure to conform to the state's monolingual policies and the negative stigma attached to Chinese literacy significantly caused the dilemma in her attitude toward her ancestral language.

Wantani's experience highlights the challenges faced by individuals learning Chinese in an environment where their language and culture were devalued and stigmatized by the government's policies and treatment. Her story provides an example of how state-imposed language policies could hinder literacy and shape individuals' sense of self and belonging. The policies aimed at promoting the Thai language and suppressing Chinese literacy created a complex dynamic where individuals like Wantani had to navigate their cultural identities within a framework of nationalistic and political ideologies.

Jeng

Jeng, 78, is the eldest son of a Thai Chinese mother and a Chinese father. At home, his family spoke Thai and Teochew. From 1952 to 1958, Jeng attended a Chinese school, completing official Chinese classes from grades one to four, the highest levels permitted by the government. However, after grade four, Jeng had to drop out of school to help his parents support his younger siblings' education. Despite this, he continued to self-study Chinese using books and lessons suggested by his Chinese teachers.

Even with his personal motivation to learn Chinese, Jeng's experience in the Chinese school was far from pleasant. The restricted hours of Chinese lessons and the mandate of “only Thai language” use, a push from Phibun's nationalistic campaign, made it difficult for him to fully engage with his Chinese language. “We were only allowed a maximum of six hours of Chinese lessons each week,” Jeng recalled. “Other subjects were taught in Thai, and we were required to speak Thai at all times, even during breaks,” Jeng recollected that even when gathering with friends who were also Thai

Chinese, they spoke in Thai, with not a single Chinese word exchanged outside their Chinese classes.

It is important to emphasize that these were “Chinese” schools. These extreme regulations clearly indicated the government’s lack of support for Chinese literacy and its intention to promote Thai language. These policies aimed to assimilate non-Thai speakers and suppress other languages, reinforcing the superiority of standardized Thai. Phibun’s monolingual policy labeled students who inherited Chinese identity markers as non-Thai, or worse, a threat to Thai society. The Thai government believed Chinese schools supported communist activities, whether in organization or ideology, because 1) the government of China supplied the curriculum for the Chinese schools and thus used them to spread communist ideologies and agenda; 2) Chinese schools were considered headquarters for communist organizations; and 3) Chinese schools were used to train “the revolutionary working classes” (Wongsurawat 42). These beliefs stigmatized Chinese schools and Chinese descendants.

However, none of these claims were shared or experienced by Jeng or the other participants. Although the government believed that materials used in Chinese schools were regulated by the Chinese government, this was true only in the early years of these Chinese schools. In reality, the Ministry of Education screened these documents and all schools had to adhere to the Ministry of Education’s regulations regarding syllabi, schedules, and textbooks as addressed in the Private School Act. Moreover, in later years, textbooks used in Chinese schools had to be published by the Ministry of Education only (Rattanamankasem). Thus, the Thai government had full control of the contents and the teaching materials. In terms of political agenda, Jeng attested: “They taught us to read, to write, and to remember words. We just copied Chinese characters page by page, and that would normally take all the one or two hours we had; there was no time for political discussion or anything.”

In fact, Jeng had a close relationship with these Chinese teachers because after dropping out, he stayed unofficially at the school for another two years to learn Chinese out of genuine interest. He confirmed that his teacher never introduced political issues in class. He was never invited to participate in a communist organization. However, it would be naïve to conclude that there was no political agenda embedded in the curriculum. But the extent to which that agenda influenced teaching or became the purpose of Chinese class or school, especially in language classes where most time and homework were dedicated to vocabulary memorization, is a false accusation. At the least, Jeng’s experience shows a different view from the government’s perception. Even during the tutoring sessions arranged by his father for him and his siblings, his teacher did not attempt to convince him to join any communist-related groups. Jeng’s story, in addition to showing the on-going suppression of Chinese literacy, underscores the dissonance between government narratives and the realities faced by Thai Chinese individuals.

Suwat

Suwat, 73, attended the same Chinese school four years after Jeng, from 1956 to 1960, during the final two years of the Phibun regime. He is Jeng’s younger brother and went to the same Chinese school as Jeng, the only Chinese school in their town. Afterward, he continued his studies at a Thai high school and university.

Although Suwat claimed that he was too young to fully understand the political climate at that time, he noticed the state's control over Chinese language education. In elementary school, Chinese lessons were allowed a maximum of six hours per week, and Chinese schools that did not follow these restrictions were closed. Suwat recalled that he studied Chinese for only one hour a day. The restriction on learning hours limited opportunities for Chinese descendants to engage with their language and culture. This limitation may not have appeared overtly suppressive, but it gradually

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taught Chinese descendants that their language and their Chineseness were undesirable. Suwat expressed that studying Chinese or even showing an interest in learning it could jeopardize a person’s reputation, as it would associate them with communism. For this reason, none of his classmates, many of whom were Thai with Chinese ancestry, continued their Chinese lessons beyond grade four. The

stigma surrounding the Chinese language clearly lingered, contributing to Suwat’s self-doubt. During the interview, he asked himself, “Why do I have to be afraid of being caught learning Chinese or alleged as a communist when I study the Chinese language?” The doubt illustrates how the negative ideology of the Chinese language crept into the minds of Thai Chinese individuals, gradually building in them a sense of shame for being Chinese descendants. The monolingual ideology embedded in national policies slowly internalized itself within the Thai Chinese’s individual ideologies, cementing the perception of Mandarin and other Chinese dialects as unwanted languages.

Due to limited school hours and confined learning environments, some parents, including Suwat’s father, sought private tutors to teach their children Chinese literacy, which became their secret lessons. Suwat’s father hired a private tutor to teach his seven children both Mandarin and Teochew at home. Suwat and his other siblings felt forced to be there, so they paid little attention to the lessons. When he continued his studies in Thai secondary school, which offered no Chinese classes at all, he and his siblings abandoned their Chinese literacy, leading to a fading connection to the Chinese language.

Suwat’s experience shows that the restrictions on Chinese language education not only limited access to their linguistic roots but also instilled feelings of shame and doubt among Thai Chinese individuals. His story is similar to Wantani’s, even though they experienced these suppressive Chinese literacy 10 years apart. The enforcement of these anti-Chinese policies took over a decade and left long-lasting impacts on Chinese descendants and their communities. Despite efforts to preserve their heritage through private tutoring, the long-term effects of these policies led to a gradual loss of linguistic roots and a complex relationship with their identity.

Lina

Lina, 71, the younger sister of Jeng and Suwat, attended a Chinese school from 1958 to 1962, the last phase of the nationalist policy periods. After four years of learning Chinese, she transitioned to Thai schools that did not offer Chinese language lessons and later taught herself Mandarin.

Although Lina attended Chinese school toward the end of Phibun's period, her experiences learning the Chinese language were similar to Jeng's and Suwat's, where strict regulations and limited opportunities to learn Chinese remained. In the school, where Chinese was expected to be taught and used, Chinese classes were limited in levels and hours. There were still no Chinese classes offered beyond grade four, and the instruction was still fewer than six hours per week. The rest of the classes were taught in Thai, and subjects related to Chinese culture or China were not permitted. These policies were rooted in the belief that Chinese schools could be breeding grounds for communist ideologies, leading to efforts to control and limit Chinese literacy. The restriction of Chinese classes and the prohibition of subjects related to Chinese culture or China were clear indications of how the Thai government used these educational spaces to enforce monolingualism and the standard Thai language and to suppress the Chinese language and its culture.

The Chinese classes Lina took included Chinese writing, calligraphy, and speaking, spread across those restricted hours. Despite having only an hour for lessons, Lina explained that students were required to learn a significant number of words each day: "We were assigned to write Chinese characters every day. Although we spent less than two hours in school learning Chinese, at home, we had a lot of writing homework. I didn't even have time to go out and play because I had to get these writings done," she complained, yet she remained fond of the language.

Even with rigorous practices of Chinese writing and vocabulary, the limited exposure both in and outside of the classroom prevented students from practicing the language, leading to a decline in their Chinese literacy. However, Lina felt fortunate that her father had arranged for a private tutor to teach Mandarin and Teochew. "I was the one among five siblings who attended the lessons and remained studying for the duration of the two-hour lesson every week," she explains. Her tutoring schedule included Monday for Teochew, Tuesday for Mandarin, and another day for Chinese abacus. Lina recounted these experiences with a smile, recalling her time shared with her siblings. Despite none of them enjoying the lessons as much as she did, she continued with the language.

"It was a mixed feeling. On one hand, I was furious that I had to study and couldn't go play with my friends. On the other hand, I was also interested in learning. However, those lessons were not for long, though, which was too bad."

These secret classes were discontinued when Lina moved to another school where Chinese was not part of her study. Being discouraged from using Chinese outside of class, and the societal perception of Chinese literacy as undesirable or even dangerous, contributed to a sense of stigma. Lina noted that one of the reasons she wanted to learn Chinese was to embrace her identity as a Thai with Chinese ancestry. Despite the lack of support for her Chinese literacy in Thai culture and community—where it was often seen as unnecessary—she persevered and wanted to preserve her "ancestral language." Lina's mixed feelings about her Chinese education reflect the internal conflict

faced by many Thai Chinese individuals as they navigated their dual identities.

DISCUSSION

These stories demonstrate that negative ideologies towards Chinese literacy and China, as shown in the written policies, were enacted in schools and society for decades. All individuals experienced significant restrictions on their Chinese education. Chinese classes were limited in hours and levels, with a maximum of six hours per week and no classes beyond grade four. The government's consistent efforts to establish Thai as the primary and preferred language diminished access to Chinese literacy. By associating the Chinese language with communism and discouraging its use, the government has fostered a negative ideology towards Chinese language and literacy nationally, which has gradually transferred to individual ideology.

As shown in the participants' stories, they felt societal pressure to conform to the state's monolingual policies and had negative experiences acquiring Chinese literacy. The negative ideologies towards the Chinese language also created internal conflicts and feelings of shame, leading to a complex relationship with their ancestral language and their Chinese heritage. The influence of the policies on the literacy experience of the Thai Chinese illustrates how monolingual ideology of a dominant language reduces the importance and validity of non-dominant languages. In *Literacy and Racial Justice*, Catherine Prendergast argues that one of the key components of the ideology of literacy is the belief that "literacy belongs to Whites" (5). In the non-white context here, this idea can be expanded to mean that "literacy belongs to the oppressor," irrespective of their skin color. A dominant group in a society wants to keep its power and uses literacy as a tool to do just that. In Thailand, for example, those in power were not white, but the government still wanted to control their citizens by naming a desirable and undesirable language and literacy. The restricted access to literacy, through various policies and regulations, ultimately reinforces a cycle of "othering" non-dominant languages through the educational system.

More importantly, Chinese schools were typically established and run by Chinese communities because Chinese parents hoped a Chinese school would provide sufficient foundations so that their children could communicate or reconnect with their relatives in China. These schools were supposed to teach Chinese or use Chinese as a language of instruction. However, the government used political tools, such as regulations and law enforcement, to crush the communities' hopes and dreams. The focus on monolingual orientation restricts individuals' language skills and literacy (Flowers 34). These monolingual policies can lead to violence at many levels, ranging from devaluing, suppressing, and silencing, to the eradication of language varieties, as well as penalizing speakers of non-preferred languages (Watson and Shapiro 2). However, while the state attempted to suppress Chinese literacy, many Chinese families persisted in learning Mandarin to maintain their ancestral connection. This tension created a complex affective environment where people felt both pride in their heritage and fear of being associated with communism. The stigmatization of the Chinese language and its association with communism created an environment where individuals had to navigate their identities carefully, particularly through private spaces.

Their families sought private tutors to teach Chinese at home. This action highlights the importance of familial support in maintaining cultural and linguistic heritage. The strong commitment of these individuals to their Chinese heritage displays their resilience and determination to preserve their cultural identity. However, the efforts to maintain cultural heritage through private tutoring, which may have fostered a sense of solidarity and support within the community, could not counteract the larger forces of the educational system and societal ideologies.

Participants shared their experiences with after-school Chinese lessons, noting that while the format was similar, their learning experiences varied. Wantani focused only on Mandarin, while Jeng, Suwat, and Lina learned both Mandarin and Teochew. Most participants admitted they did not prioritize or consistently practice their Chinese literacy, as they saw little practical use for it. Their proficiency in Chinese gradually diminished and was replaced by Thai. Many found that as adults, they could no longer speak or write in Mandarin or even in their heritage language, Teochew. These stories highlight how the value and function of Chinese literacy, suppressed for over a decade

“Many found that as adults, they could no longer speak or write in Mandarin or even in their heritage language, Teochew. These stories highlight how the value and function of Chinese literacy, suppressed for over a decade by the government’s policies, had gradually subsided for these participants.”

by the government’s policies, had gradually subsided for these participants.

The national push for using Thai, along with its prevalence in most of the Thai community around them, influenced their language use. Even their homes, where they used mixed languages

of Thai and Chinese, became spaces dominated by Thai. Their parents spoke more Thai within the family as their children went to Thai schools and could not converse in Chinese. Besides, the parents wanted their children to speak the dominant language for their academic and career benefits. People in the community and their friends also spoke Thai. Thus, Chinese literacy lost its power, value, and function not only in educational settings but also in familial and communal spaces.

In addition to revealing how written literacy campaigns and policies impact individual experiences of people on the ground, this study deepens our understanding of literacy and language ideologies, which are closely linked to national propaganda and international relations. For instance, while pursuing an anti-communist agenda supported by the US, Thailand still needed to maintain a positive relationship with China. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs communicated with the Chinese Embassy on various regulations and collaboration on Chinese education in Thailand. On one hand, Thailand aimed to limit the use of the Chinese language and literacy; on the other, it sought to preserve good ties with China by agreeing to use Mandarin as a language of instruction in Chinese schools, as requested by the Chinese government. This decision reflected a commitment to Chinese monolingualism policy, neglecting other Chinese dialects spoken by most of the Chinese community in Thailand. While the government tried to prevent the spread of Chinese communism, it simultaneously allowed standardized language from the Chinese government to be implemented in Chinese schools.

Besides, a brief historical overview shows that Thailand adjusted its diplomatic policies following the changes in US-China relationship. This balancing act—striving to navigate relationships for their interests and survival—has been a common thread for many countries, especially smaller ones whose economies and security depend on more powerful nations. Such hierarchical dynamics underscore how national language ideologies are not only influenced by national agenda but external political pressures. This study reveals that perceptions of Chinese literacy are shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts at both local and global levels. The narratives highlight the complex interplay between individual ideology, monolingual and standardized ideologies from the national policies, and global politics.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of Thai Chinese individuals—Wantani, Jeng, Suwat, and Lina—who attended Chinese schools at different times reveal the long implementation of nationalistic policies. These policies, rooted in xenophobic ideologies and political agendas, significantly restricted their learning opportunities, fostered negative perceptions of Chinese literacy, leading to a complex relationship between Chinese descendants and their Chinese literacy. The study highlights how these negative ideologies permeated not only educational spaces but also other aspects of society, leading to internal conflicts and feelings of shame and doubt among Thai Chinese individuals.

By examining the lived experiences of these participants, this study illustrates how the Thai government's efforts to promote Thai as the dominant language and associate Chinese literacy with communism created an environment of fear and stigma. Despite the resilience and determination of families to preserve their cultural and linguistic heritage through private tutoring, their best efforts often fell short. The limited influence of familial efforts could not overcome the national agenda or societal pressure. The connection between local experiences and national and global contexts reveals how language ideologies are influenced by external political pressures and international relations. The balancing act of Thailand's diplomatic policies, particularly in relation to US-China relations, emphasizes the link between national language ideologies and global politics. The fear of communism, driven by the political agenda of the US that Thailand sided with, and Thailand's nationalistic policies, led to the challenges faced by these Chinese descendants in acquiring Chinese literacy.

In conclusion, this research deepens our understanding of literacy and language ideologies, showing how ideologies presented on paper were carried out and impacted individual experiences. It also broadens the perspective on nationalist language suppression, moving beyond English-only policies in the US or national language policies in other settings by pointing out the complex connection between the suppression of Chinese literacy in Thailand and various layers of power and influence, including national ideologies and global politics.

NOTES

¹ There are various terms for people born in Thailand to Chinese parents, including “Chinese Thai,” “Sino-Thai,” and “Thais of Chinese origin.” I used “Thai Chinese” to represent Thai nationality with Chinese ancestry, as this is how the participants identified themselves. This choice also emphasizes their legitimacy as Thai citizens. However, their nationality is often overshadowed by perceptions based on their appearance and historical context.

² In Thailand, there are five main Chinese dialects spoken: Teochew, Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, and Hainan. Teochew is the most dominant dialect in Thailand among these ancestral languages (Chokkajitsumpun). Teochew is a dialect of the Chinese language spoken by the Teochew people in Chaozhou, a city in the eastern Guangdong province of China, their diaspora around the world, and became a lingua franca for Chinese people in Thailand to use in businesses and Chinese associations (Chokkajitsumpun; Rattanamankasem).

³ I retrieved these documents from the National Archives of Thailand, and they are written in Thai. Thus, I read these documents in Thai and translated them.

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