

The Linguistic Landscape of Chiang Mai: Multilingualism and Cultural Communication in Tourism

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Abstract: Chiang Mai, a renowned tourist destination in northern Thailand, offers a fascinating linguistic landscape (LL) that reflects the intersection of cultural heritage, globalization, and tourism dynamics. This study explores the distribution and functions of languages in Chiang Mai's public signage, focusing on the dominance of Thai, the auxiliary roles of English and Chinese, and the implications for cultural preservation and global accessibility. Thai signage reinforces cultural identity and heritage, while English and Chinese cater to the linguistic needs of international tourists, enhancing navigation and cross-cultural communication. The research highlights the dual functions of LL: its informational role facilitates practical communication, and its symbolic role reflects the city's inclusivity and cultural richness. However, challenges such as inconsistent translations and limited representation of minority languages remain. Addressing these issues through standardized multilingual policies and the integration of technology could further improve Chiang Mai's LL, positioning it as a global model for balancing cultural preservation and tourism. This study contributes to the growing discourse on multilingualism and linguistic landscapes, offering insights into the role of language in fostering sustainable and inclusive tourism.

Keywords: Chiang Mai; Tourist Signage; Linguistic Landscape; Multilingual Phenomena

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1.Introduction

The linguistic landscape (LL) serves as a vital tool for understanding the dynamics of multilingualism and cultural interaction in public spaces, particularly in tourism-rich regions. Chiang Mai, as a prominent tourist destination in northern Thailand, exemplifies how language choices on signage reflect the interplay of cultural identity, language policy, and economic demands in a globalized context. The concept of LL, introduced by Landry and Bourhis (1997), encompasses all visible language symbols in public spaces, including road signs, advertisements, and commercial signage. These landscapes not only serve informational purposes, such as guiding tourists, but also carry symbolic meanings that convey cultural values and social power dynamics (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Studies in various contexts, such as the multilingual tourism villages in Indonesia and China, have highlighted how LL adapts to both local and global needs. For instance, research in Yogyakarta's Pentingsari Tourism Village revealed that multilingual signage primarily serves local community needs rather than merely catering to international visitors (Ni Kade et al., 2024). Similarly, in Xi'an, China, LL construction reflects a balance between political motives in official domains and economic incentives in private signage (Jingze Tian & Jianguo Tian, 2023).

Furthermore, in Slovakia, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the LL adapted to reflect regulatory discourses aimed at managing public health through multilingual and multimodal signage (Ferenčík & Bariová, 2023). These examples underscore how LL mirrors sociolinguistic and cultural dynamics, shaping visitors' perceptions and fostering cross-cultural communication. In Chiang Mai, the coexistence of Thai, English, Chinese, and other languages on signage embodies the city's effort to maintain its cultural heritage while accommodating global tourism. This study seeks to explore the multilingual phenomena in Chiang Mai's LL, examining its informational and symbolic functions, the interplay between language and culture, and its implications for tourism and language policy.

2.Literature Review

The linguistic landscape (LL) serves as a lens through which the sociolinguistic dynamics of a region can be examined, particularly in the context of tourism. Introduced by Landry and Bourhis (1997), LL highlights the visibility and salience of languages in public spaces, reflecting cultural identity, social power, and language policy. Over the past two decades, this concept has evolved to include interdisciplinary perspectives, encompassing sociolinguistics, cultural studies, tourism, and urban geography. This theoretical foundation is pivotal for understanding the multilingual phenomena observed in Chiang Mai, a globally renowned tourist destination, where language use in signage reflects the interplay between globalization, cultural preservation, and visitor accessibility (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). The role of LL in tourism is particularly significant, as signage in public spaces often serves both informational and symbolic functions. Informationally, signage provides directions, safety protocols, and cultural guidelines that enhance the tourist experience. Symbolically, the languages chosen for public signage reflect the sociocultural hierarchy of the region and its linguistic inclusivity. For example, research in Baturraden Tourism Resorts in Indonesia highlights how monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual signs cater to different audiences. Local languages like Bahasa Ngapak act as markers of cultural identity, while English and Arabic serve as tools for globalization and religious connection, respectively. This demonstrates how LL not only facilitates communication but also reinforces the cultural and historical identity of a place (Sholikhah et al., 2020). Further advancing this field, Shohamy and Gorter (2009) expanded the theoretical scope of LL by introducing frameworks for understanding linguistic ecology and multimodality. These frameworks emphasize how multilingualism in public spaces interacts with language policy, globalization, and local identity. The authors argue that LL serves as a microcosm of societal changes, particularly in urban and tourism settings, where linguistic choices reflect the competing demands of cultural preservation and economic development (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). This is particularly relevant in tourism-centric regions like Chiang Mai, where Thai signage preserves national identity while English and Chinese signage cater to international visitors.

The application of LL theory has also extended into practical domains, including the design and management of tourism landscapes. Liu Zhao's research on the Wuxi Canal Scenic Area in China demonstrates how diachronic storytelling through signage enhances the tourism experience. Zhao emphasizes the need for signage to align with the historical and cultural narratives of a region, transforming public spaces into "synchronic space theaters" that immerse visitors in the local culture (Zhao, 2019). This approach not only enhances visitor engagement but also ensures the sustainability of cultural heritage in the face of globalization.

In addition, the economic implications of LL have gained attention in recent studies. Gorter and Cenoz (2009) explored the concept of linguistic economics, highlighting how multilingual signage can maximize communication efficiency and economic outcomes in tourism. For instance, the presence of English and Chinese on public signage in Chiang Mai not only facilitates navigation for international tourists but also signals the region's openness to global markets. This dual function of LL underscores its importance in balancing the demands of localization and globalization (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). Practical applications of LL in tourism management have also been explored in community-based settings. Research on the Subang Museum in West Java demonstrates how introducing LL theory to local stakeholders, such as guides and museum staff, fosters better understanding and implementation of multilingual signage. This approach not only improves the visitor experience but also empowers local communities by integrating their cultural narratives into the tourism landscape (Syafroni, 2023). In Chiang Mai, the coexistence of Thai, English, and Chinese on signage illustrates the practical application of these theoretical insights. Thai remains the dominant language, preserving the cultural and historical identity of the

region, while English serves as a global lingua franca, and Chinese reflects the growing influence of Chinese tourists. This multilingual approach not only facilitates cross-cultural communication but also reinforces Chiang Mai's position as a leading international tourist destination.

In summary, the growing body of literature on LL demonstrates its significance as a tool for understanding and managing multilingualism in tourism contexts. From theoretical advancements to practical applications, LL offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing how languages in public spaces reflect and shape the cultural, economic, and social dynamics of a region. As Chiang Mai continues to attract visitors from around the world, the insights from LL studies will be invaluable in ensuring that its linguistic landscape remains both functional and culturally resonant.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach to examine the linguistic landscape (LL) of Chiang Mai's tourist attractions, focusing on the multilingual signage that reflects cultural and social dynamics. The methods include field observation, photographic documentation, and literature analysis, all aimed at comprehensively understanding the interplay of language, culture, and tourism in the city.

3.1 Field Observation

Field observation is a cornerstone of linguistic landscape research, as it provides direct insights into the spatial distribution and functionality of multilingual signs. Researchers systematically documented public signs in key tourist destinations such as Wat Chedi Luang, Wat Phra Singh, and Wat Phra That Doi Suthep. Observations focused on the languages used, their relative prominence, and their spatial placement. This approach aligns with the practices outlined by Ni Kade et al. (2024), who emphasized the role of systematic field documentation in understanding how LL serves local and tourist populations (Ni Kade et al., 2024).

3.2 Photographic Documentation

Photographic documentation was employed to capture the visual elements of multilingual signage, including textual content, font styles, and the integration of non-textual elements such as symbols and colors. This method is particularly effective for analyzing how signs convey meaning beyond their linguistic content, as demonstrated in studies like that of Lei and Teng (2024), who explored the multimodal aspects of LL in Guilin (Lei & Teng, 2024).

3.3 Literature Analysis

A comprehensive literature review was conducted to contextualize the findings within existing frameworks of linguistic landscape studies. The review covered theoretical contributions by Landry and Bourhis (1997) on the symbolic and informational functions of LL, as well as recent empirical studies on multilingual urban environments (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). This method provides a theoretical lens to analyze how Chiang Mai's LL balances local identity with the demands of global tourism.

3.4 Integration and Analysis

The collected data were analyzed qualitatively, focusing on the interplay of top-down and bottom-up signage creation, as explored by Napu (2024) in his study of Gorontalo City's LL (Napu, 2024). Top-down signs, often created by governmental agencies, were examined for their adherence to language policies, while bottom-up signs reflected the economic motivations of private businesses catering to international tourists. The analysis also incorporated the concept of "place-making," as discussed by Li et al. (2023), to explore how linguistic choices contribute to the cultural and economic identity of Chiang Mai (Li et al., 2023). By combining these methods, this study aims to provide a holistic understanding of Chiang Mai's linguistic landscape, revealing its role in facilitating cross-cultural communication and enhancing the tourist experience.

4. Research Results: Linguistic Landscape in Chiang Mai Tourism Signage

4.1 Linguistic Dominance and Preservation: The Primacy of Thai

The linguistic landscape (LL) of Chiang Mai reflects the city's cultural roots and priorities, with Thai being the dominant language across most signage in public and tourist spaces. This dominance underscores the role of the national language in preserving cultural heritage and reinforcing national identity. In religious and cultural sites such as Wat Phra Singh and

Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, Thai is prominently displayed on informational boards, detailing the temples' histories, religious rituals, and cultural significance. For example, Thai-language signage at Wat Chedi Luang not only provides historical insights about the site but also serves as a tool for transmitting traditional values and Buddhist teachings. This approach aligns with linguistic landscape practices observed in other cultural heritage areas, such as Juguo Ancient City in China, where the dominant use of Chinese reflects efforts to preserve and present cultural heritage while catering to a global audience (Nie et al., 2023).

The Thai language on signage also serves as a cultural marker, signifying authenticity and pride in local traditions. It reinforces the connection between the local community and its cultural heritage, ensuring that even in the face of globalization, the national language remains a cornerstone of identity. By prioritizing Thai, Chiang Mai sets a precedent for the role of dominant languages in maintaining cultural authenticity, especially in tourist-heavy areas.

4.2 Global Accessibility: The Role of English and Chinese

While Thai dominates, English and Chinese function as critical auxiliary languages, enabling the city to cater to its diverse international visitors. English, as a global lingua franca, is widely utilized in key tourist hubs, including the Chiang Mai International Airport, shopping districts, and hotels. For instance, signage at the Chiang Mai Night Bazaar is frequently bilingual, featuring Thai and English. These signs provide tourists with vital information on product descriptions, pricing, and market navigation, significantly improving accessibility and reducing language barriers.

Chinese signage, on the other hand, reflects the growing importance of Chinese tourism to Chiang Mai's economy. Locations such as the Wat Phra That Doi Suthep temple and the Central Festival Mall frequently feature signs and promotional materials in Chinese, targeting the increasing influx of Chinese-speaking visitors. Chinese signage not only provides practical benefits, such as explaining cultural practices and behavioral guidelines, but also serves an economic function by encouraging Chinese tourists to engage more deeply with local businesses. Similar patterns are observed globally, such as in Xi'an, China, where multilingual signage—primarily in Chinese, English, and other auxiliary languages—balances the demands of both economic motivations and cultural representation (Tian & Tian, 2023). By incorporating English and Chinese, Chiang Mai's LL acknowledges the linguistic diversity of its visitors while ensuring inclusivity. This multilingual approach is vital for facilitating cross-cultural interactions, enhancing visitor satisfaction, and reinforcing the city's position as a premier global tourism destination.

4.3 Multifunctional Impact: Informational Value of Signage

The informational function of Chiang Mai's LL plays a pivotal role in shaping the tourism experience. Multilingual signage reduces confusion, facilitates navigation, and provides essential knowledge about local culture and history. For example, at the Chiang Mai Old City, signs in Thai, English, and sometimes Chinese offer detailed maps, historical overviews, and guidelines for visitors. These signs ensure that tourists can easily access important information about the city's ancient walls, temples, and cultural landmarks.

Effective informational signage also supports sustainable tourism by encouraging respectful behavior among visitors. For instance, bilingual signs at temples often include etiquette guidelines, such as instructions on appropriate dress or prohibitions against photography in certain areas. These practical elements mirror findings in other regions, such as Baturraden in Indonesia, where LLs combine cultural identity with practical accessibility to enhance the visitor experience (Sholikhah et al., 2020).

4.4 Cultural Symbolism: Linguistic Landscapes as Identity Markers

Chiang Mai's LL also carries symbolic significance, reflecting the city's efforts to balance tradition with globalization. Thai signage acts as a cultural emblem, representing the pride and authenticity of local traditions. Meanwhile, the inclusion of English and Chinese demonstrates Chiang Mai's openness to global audiences and its adaptability in a competitive tourism market. This duality enables the city to maintain its cultural essence while embracing global influences, fostering a sense of inclusivity and mutual respect.

The symbolic function of LL is further exemplified in areas like Nimmanhaemin Road, where multilingual signs reflect a blend of local and international cultures. These signs not only guide visitors but also serve as markers of the city's

cosmopolitan identity, inviting tourists to explore a vibrant intersection of traditions and modernity. Studies from other regions, such as Xi'an and Baturraden, confirm that LLs play a key role in fostering cultural appreciation and inclusivity, bridging gaps between local heritage and global perspectives (Hasni et al., 2022).

4.5 Cross-Cultural Exchange: Enhancing Global Understanding Through LL

The multilingual nature of Chiang Mai's LL facilitates meaningful cross-cultural exchanges, transforming public spaces into platforms for dialogue and understanding. Tourists encounter not only practical guidance but also opportunities to learn about Thai customs, history, and values through multilingual signs. For example, during the Yi Peng Lantern Festival, multilingual banners and boards explain the cultural significance of the event, allowing visitors to engage more deeply with local traditions. Such interactions enrich the tourism experience, fostering mutual respect and curiosity among diverse audiences. Research in other multicultural tourism hubs, such as Banyumas, Indonesia, has shown that multilingual signage encourages cultural exchange by creating shared spaces for communication and understanding (Sholikhah et al., 2020). In Chiang Mai, this approach not only benefits visitors but also strengthens the city's reputation as a welcoming and inclusive destination.

Despite its successes, Chiang Mai's LL faces challenges, including inconsistent translations, a lack of standardization, and the limited representation of minority languages. These issues can undermine the city's efforts to present itself as an inclusive and globally connected destination. Addressing these gaps through standardized multilingual policies and professional translation practices would further elevate the quality of Chiang Mai's LL, ensuring it remains both practical and symbolically powerful.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from Chiang Mai's linguistic landscape (LL) offer significant insights into the interaction of language, culture, and tourism. The dominance of Thai on signage underscores the critical role of national languages in preserving cultural heritage and reinforcing local identity. By prioritizing Thai, Chiang Mai ensures that its unique cultural and historical narratives remain prominent, even as the city embraces globalization. Similar patterns observed in other cultural sites, such as Juguo Ancient City in China, highlight the importance of maintaining cultural authenticity in the face of global tourism (Nie et al., 2023). The inclusion of English and Chinese on signage demonstrates how LL can address the needs of a diverse and international tourist demographic. English, as the global lingua franca, facilitates communication across linguistic boundaries, while the increasing use of Chinese reflects the growing importance of Chinese-speaking tourists in Chiang Mai's economy. These practices mirror findings in Xi'an, where multilingual signage caters to international visitors while reflecting local economic and cultural priorities (Tian & Tian, 2023). The dual informational and symbolic functions of LL are evident in Chiang Mai's signage. Multilingual signs enhance accessibility, reduce language barriers, and provide tourists with practical guidance on navigation, etiquette, and cultural understanding. Moreover, LL serves as a marker of inclusivity and cultural identity, fostering mutual respect and engagement between locals and international visitors. These findings align with global trends, as seen in Baturraden, Indonesia, where multilingual signage bridges cultural divides and promotes cross-cultural exchange (Sholikhah et al., 2020).

However, challenges remain, including inconsistent translation quality, underrepresentation of minority languages, and a lack of standardization in signage. Addressing these issues could further enhance Chiang Mai's LL. For instance, adopting standardized multilingual policies and investing in professional translation practices would improve the accuracy and inclusivity of signage. Additionally, incorporating minority languages, such as local dialects, could foster a deeper sense of cultural diversity and inclusivity, reflecting Chiang Mai's multicultural identity. The implications of these findings extend beyond Chiang Mai. They provide a model for other global tourist destinations seeking to balance cultural preservation with the demands of international tourism. Policymakers and tourism stakeholders should consider the following key recommendations:

Standardized Multilingual Policies: Develop and enforce guidelines for consistent language use and accurate translations on public and private signage.

Cultural Awareness in LL Design: Prioritize the representation of local languages and integrate cultural narratives into multilingual signage to preserve authenticity.

Inclusion of Minority Languages: Incorporate regional and indigenous languages into LL to reflect the full linguistic diversity

of the destination.

Ultimately, the linguistic landscape of Chiang Mai demonstrates that well-designed multilingual signage can serve as both a practical tool and a cultural bridge, enhancing the visitor experience while preserving the city's unique identity.

The linguistic landscape (LL) of Chiang Mai offers a multifaceted view of how language, culture, and tourism intersect in a globally recognized destination. Thai's dominance on signage underlines the city's commitment to preserving cultural heritage and reinforcing local identity, particularly in historical and religious sites like Wat Phra Singh and Wat Chedi Luang. This mirrors practices observed in other cultural hubs, such as Juguo Ancient City in China, where the prioritization of local language ensures the survival of cultural authenticity amid the pressures of globalization (Nie et al., 2023).

Simultaneously, the strategic inclusion of English and Chinese reflects Chiang Mai's responsiveness to international tourism. English, as the global lingua franca, facilitates accessibility for diverse visitor groups, while the growing presence of Chinese underscores the city's acknowledgment of the economic significance of Chinese-speaking tourists. These multilingual practices align with findings from other tourism hubs, such as Xi'an, China, where LL reflects both economic and cultural priorities (Tian & Tian, 2023). Chiang Mai's LL effectively fulfills dual roles: the informational function enhances tourist accessibility by providing clear guidance and cultural context, while the symbolic function highlights inclusivity and the city's openness to cross-cultural exchanges. The multilingual signage not only bridges language barriers but also fosters cultural appreciation and mutual respect among tourists and locals, a phenomenon also observed in Baturraden, Indonesia, where LL facilitates cultural dialogue (Sholikhah et al., 2020). However, challenges such as inconsistent translations, limited representation of minority languages, and lack of standardization remain. Addressing these issues could further enhance Chiang Mai's LL, ensuring that it continues to serve as both a practical tool and a cultural bridge.

Looking ahead, the development of Chiang Mai's LL presents an opportunity to serve as a model for other global tourist destinations seeking to balance cultural preservation and globalization. Future initiatives should consider the following directions:

Standardization and Accuracy of Translations: Inconsistencies in translation can detract from the utility and inclusivity of LL. Establishing standardized guidelines for translation quality, accuracy, and presentation can improve the coherence and effectiveness of multilingual signage.

Integration of Minority and Local Languages: Incorporating regional dialects and minority languages into signage can enrich Chiang Mai's linguistic diversity, offering tourists a more authentic and nuanced understanding of the region's cultural fabric. Such practices would also reflect a commitment to inclusivity and representation of all community members.

Digital Innovations in LL: Leveraging technology, such as QR codes on signage, can offer visitors access to multilingual resources, audio guides, and deeper cultural insights. Digital tools can supplement physical signage, providing richer and more interactive experiences for tourists.

Collaboration Across Stakeholders: Successful LL implementation requires collaboration between local governments, businesses, and linguists. Engaging these stakeholders can ensure that signage meets both practical needs and cultural objectives, fostering sustainable tourism development.

Longitudinal Studies of LL Impact: Continuous research into the impact of LL on tourist behavior, cultural exchange, and economic outcomes can provide valuable insights for further refinement. Comparative studies with other destinations could also help identify best practices.

By addressing these prospects, Chiang Mai can solidify its role as a leading destination that exemplifies how linguistic landscapes can enhance tourism, preserve cultural heritage, and promote global understanding. As globalization accelerates, Chiang Mai's experience offers valuable lessons for the world, emphasizing the importance of thoughtful, inclusive, and culturally respectful approaches to multilingual communication.

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